**The Connubial Catalyst**

by xmarisolx

**Summary**

Sheldon and Amy wrestle with the increasing demands of modern life and family, but an opportunity comes along that may finally make their dreams come true. Meanwhile, Leonard, Howard and Raj face major life changes as well.

**Notes**

This is a companion piece to "The Coitus Consideration" and a sequel to The Gamete Indeterminacy, and those stories are mandatory reading to understand this story. So… chop, chop.

See the end of the work for more notes.
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"If I'm being completely honest," Sheldon continued, "I believe the Waldorf system of music education is the ideal method to use with young children, and it perturbs me that it hasn't been integrated more universally into our juvenile music education programs. Not that I'm particularly interested in childhood education of any sort, but I'm still right."

Amy nodded, thinking back to what his profile has said: "Likes the theoretical aspects of music, and most things, more than its real-world application."

"That was a fascinating bit of information on the pentatonic scale," she said, after taking a sip of water, "although I think it is only tangentially relates to my original inquiry."

"Which one was that?" he asked.

"What is your favorite song?"

"Ah… I've long answered this question with 'Love Bites' by Def Leppard," he answered. "After my brother got dumped by his eighth-grade girlfriend, Betty Rouser, he played the song on loop for 13 days until my dad threatened to shoot him with his twelve-gage shotgun. Being but a boy at the time, I couldn't help but be forever branded by the rock tune. As a bonus, it rather concisely summarizes my views on romantic entanglements."

"Indeed."

Sheldon pushed away his own glass of water and folded his hands. "My apologies on my previous conversational detour."

"None needed. I think your response provided for very engaging conversation fodder."

Sheldon smiled. Just then, there was the loud ding of a timer going off. Amy lifted her phone, looking at its face.

"And that chime indicates the end of our hour. You have officially dispensed with your duties as my date," she said. "But, before we conclude, do you have any questions for me?"

"Actually," Sheldon began with some chagrin, "I anticipated that this meeting would be a howling fiasco, and prepared little more than a look of haughty derision with which to ridicule my companions."

"Hm," Amy said, with furrowed brow. "Is it always your custom to approach new experiences with such pessimism?"

"Now, now," Sheldon said. "I wouldn't necessarily consider myself a pessimist. I live life with what could be called 'cautious optimism', with the occasional foray into whimsical daydreaming; in fact, it is my life's goal to someday win the Nobel Prize."

Amy nodded absently, her eyes trained on Sheldon, but her mind grinding away elsewhere. Sheldon didn't miss the distant look on her face.

"I thought such a declaration might have been met with more enthusiasm," he said.
"While I certainly recognize that to win such a distinguished award would be the highlight of any scientist's career, I can't help but wonder if it makes for a suitable goal, considering that it requires equal parts determination and luck."

Sheldon found this statement surprising. "How so?"

"Well, might I compare it to winning an Emmy for, say, Lead Actor in a Comedy Series? While an actor may aspire to win the award someday—and thus does everything within his power to perfect his craft—he would also have to rely on factors outside of his control to actually win the award: finding roles in television, versus those in theater or movies; being a part of a popular production that enjoys a broad fan base; and ultimately gaining enough renown among the voting community to actually be selected. For all his efforts, these factors are simply beyond the jurisdiction of the actor."

Sheldon took issue with this analogy. "What you fail to acknowledge, Amy, is that unlike the Arts, which are fraught with largely subjective criteria and stupid people, Science is a quantifiable discipline populated by the intellectual elite."

"While the science of any given researcher may be neatly objective," she argued, "the Nobel selection process is largely the same as any other: a nomination pool, a debate, a narrowing of the candidates, and a final vote."

Sheldon thought on this a moment. "So you find the Nobel Prize to be a trivial accomplishment."

Amy's face registered her horror at being misunderstood. "Far from it," she assured him. Her face took on a tender quality. "In fact, I think that any man who would aspire for such greatness and then exert himself towards that goal—with singular focus and passion for his work—to be among the greatest of scholars and a boon to his field."

Her words touched something in Sheldon and, though he couldn't see it, there was a cheer in his eyes and he wore a smile of contentment.

His friends, who were at a nearby table keeping themselves busy with coffee and Aquaman trivia, could see Sheldon's face as clear as day. Raj began to chant in a singsong manner. "He likes her. He wanna date her."

"If you quote one more line from Ms. Congeniality or any other of those god-awful Sandra Bullock movies, I swear to God I will stab you in the neck with this spork," Howard said.

Raj shook his head. "I hate to say it, but you're turning into your mother."

Howard shot him a dark glare, with an insult rallying on his lips, when Sheldon waved the two men over. Composing themselves, they rose and walked to the table.

"Amy would like for one of you to take a picture of us together so she can post it to her Twitter feed, thus adding credence to this faux-date."

Howard nodded. "Sure," he said, and taking her phone, took a picture. "There."

Amy and Sheldon stood, and she held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you Sheldon Cooper, and thank you for your services." She turned to leave, but Sheldon called to her.

"Amy," he said. She turned around. He bobbed his head once, taking a step forward. "I've enjoyed this brief interlude and, if you would be amenable to the idea, I would like to converse with you again. Specifically on the finer points of the cognitive function of echinoderms."
Amy paused, considering his proposal, and then nodded. "While I anticipated this would be a one-time meeting, I am not opposed to keeping you abreast of my research. Perhaps we can continue communication through text messaging or Facebook chat."

Sheldon nodded. "A splendid idea."

With that, she nodded once and left. Raj and Howard started giggling among themselves.

"Yikes," Raj said. "You got cold dissed."

"Whatever do you mean?" Sheldon asked.

"C'mon, Sheldon," Howard said. "You can't be that naïve. When a girl offers to 'chat' with you, you're never gonna get any nookie out of her. Trust me, I speak from experience."

"Gentlemen, you are once again blindly guided by your rampaging, though sorely disused, libidos. Amy and I enjoyed a connection of the mind. Our relationship will no doubt remain impersonal, though intellectually stimulating."

"Yeaaah," Howard said with a smirk. "You're never gonna hear from that chick again."

Just then Sheldon's phone vibrated. He checked his text messages and burst into one of his gaspy laughs.

"It's Amy," he explained. "She sends a joke: 'What did the grad student investigate when he switched fields from geology to particle physics?"

Raj and Howard stared at him blankly.

"Earthquarks." He laughed again. "Gentlemen, I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful virtual relationship." He practically skipped off as he left through the main door.

"Well, I'll be damned," Howard said, and the two men left after him.

Nine years later.

Sheldon was sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard typing away on his laptop when Amy snuck into their bedroom, carefully shutting the door behind her. She was smiling widely.

He squinted one eye, curious to know why.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

They're asleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amy and Sheldon's decision to move back to Pasadena had been a rash one, but it had just felt right. After recognizing they wanted to be partners and raise their family together, they quickly had to come up with a plan to integrate their lives. With an established job at Caltech waiting for Sheldon, a familiar community of friends and family in Southern California, and an already furnished apartment waiting for them back in Pasadena, staying in Washington had begun to lose its allure. Sheldon had argued that he preferred his children to be raised with superficial liberals near the beach, than with hippie liberals in the snow. For her part, Amy missed her old friends and was excited to revisit a cherished time in her life.

Almost five years later, they hadn't regretted their decision. This particular night, Sheldon looked up to find Amy with a wide grin on her face and her back against the bedroom door.

"They're asleep," she whispered.

Sheldon glanced up momentarily, then checked his watch.

"But it's only 7:15. Their bedtime isn't until 8:30. And even that time has become highly negotiable as of late."

"I am fully aware of that fact, but I found both of them in their room, sound asleep on the floor. After a day of particularly rambunctious activity, they appeared to have, metaphorically, 'dropped dead' in the middle of a game of chess."

"And you left them there?"

"No," she answered, moving towards the bed. "I lifted them up and placed them in their beds—then bolted."

Sheldon squinted. "How are we sure that they didn't drug or poison themselves and, in fact, are not asleep but in a coma?"

"I was sure to check their pulses and breathing rates before I put them down."

This surprised Sheldon. "You did?"

"Of course not, but if you want to do so, be my guest," she said.

Sheldon thought a moment then returned his attention to his laptop. "I trust your judgment."

Amy nodded, and then flashed Sheldon a mischievous grin.
"So you know what this means, right?"

Sheldon looked at her, enticement on his face, but then thought better of it. "No," he said flatly, and resumed typing.

"But it's been so long, Sheldon," Amy whined.

"Only a month," he shrugged.

"Which is an eternity!" she exclaimed. "Do you think Penny and Leonard go that long in between times?"

"They don't have children," Sheldon reasoned.

"They're about to," she said.

"Granted, but a fetus can't quite appreciate the R-rated nature of the activity."

Amy sighed. "It's like you've forgotten what my hands can do."

Sheldon was getting lured again, and then stopped. "But you're always too loud. Last time your elated cries woke up Aditi."

"How soon you forget how your rocking and jumping on the bed caused the neighbors to beat against the wall."

"That was one time," he said.

"And I only woke up Aditi one time," she reminded him, but Sheldon was unmoved. "Fine, if you don't want to, I don't want to," she said, and—snatching a book from her nightstand—began reading.

"Actually," Sheldon said. "I do want to."

Amy perked up. "You're not just saying that because I want to?"

He shook his head, lost in thought. "I think I am long overdue for a predatory prowl through a terrestrial wasteland," he said.

Amy excitedly reached over into her nightstand drawer and pulled out two headsets, handing Sheldon one. Then he jumped up and grabbed two controls off of the dresser and gave one to Amy. He began to fiddle with the remote.

"Sheldor and Amelia reporting for Halo Night," Amy announced.

Penny squealed. "Hey, you guys!" she said.

"Hello, Bestie," Amy cooed back.

"Hey, sweetie!" "It's been a while. Ready to hop back in the saddle?" she asked.

"Assuming it is a symbolic one," Amy said, "I am. How're the cravings today?"

"Not so bad. Fortunately, Leonard—"

"Cease and desist immediately with all such feminized, convivial banter," Sheldon interjected.
"Halo is a war game, ladies, a simulation of battle, and thus requires its players to assume the necessary mind-set of determined grit and male brutality."

Just then, Leonard's name appeared on the screen. "Hey," they could hear him say through their headsets. "Long time no play. We've been missing you, Sheldon."

"Good Lord, Leonard," Sheldon said, slumping. "Where is your masculine aggression and testosteronal ruthlessness?"

"It's just a game, Sheldon," he replied.

Sheldon grunted. "Perhaps we should abandon tonight's plans altogether and switch to a competition more suited to the group's sensibilities. I believe Aditi has a game loaded called Barbie Dress-up."

"You just don't want me and Leonard to kick your ass again," Penny said. "No offense, Amy."

"Offense taken and channeled into the game," Amy said, then she attempted to growl, which devolved into a coughing fit. "Well, that wasn't very ladylike," she said, rubbing her chest.

Shaking his head, Sheldon put his face in his palm.

Playing Halo was just one of the ways that Sheldon had begun to get under Amy's skin. Living with Sheldon—in the truest sense of that word—had meant that, little by little, his ways had begun to rub off on her.

Take this incident:

Penny, Amy, Bernadette and Penny's friend Madison were participating in a Desperate Housewives of Cleveland marathon. At that time, Madison ran the catering cart on the set of Penny's "indie film" (which was a fancy term for a low-budget college project from one of her ex-boyfriend's little brothers).

"Seriously guys," Madison said, dunking another Oreo in her milk, "I think they've made one of these shows for every major city in the US. And from what I can tell, it doesn't matter where you are, being a housewife makes you a bitch."

Amy gasped.

Penny snapped her head around. "Madison, Amy's a housewife." She turned to Amy. "That's not what she meant. Besides, only rich housewives are bitches." Then she winced. "Not saying you're poor, I meant—"

"While I am not a wife, and thus by default not a housewife, my gasp was related to another matter entirely," Amy said, her eyes trained on the pile of Oreos on the coffee table. Penny turned to where she was looking but could not see what Amy found so alarming. Amy clarified. "There are only nine cookies left."

Bernadette slumped.

With a mouthful of Oreo, Madison shrugged. "So?"

"Sooo, now there will have to a be a discussion on how we are to divide the final ones, which poses something of mathematical conundrum, as there is no way to divide nine cookies between
four people in a way that is mathematically sound while being socially rational."

"Speaking of 'socially rational'," Bernadette said, "How about we just not worry about it and keep snacking until they're all gone. That might work."

"Bernadette," Amy said. "Fair is fair. Trust me, if I believed otherwise, I wouldn't tell the twins that a million times a day. Or considerably less, but I thought a bit of hyperbole was in order."

"Well, I'm on a diet… kind of," Penny said.

"You are?" Bernadette asked, surprised.

"I always am," Penny said. "Just split the last three among yourselves. There, problem solved."

Amy nodded when Madison piped up. "Aw, man. I need to be on a diet too. All I do is eat… All. Day. Long. My job is literally staring at decadent snacks for hours on end and I can't help but snag one or two, like… every five minutes." She sighed. "No wonder I'm a cow and you're so slim."

"Believe me," Penny said. "It's a wonder to me, too."

"So are you snacking or not?" Amy asked, surprisingly impatient.

"Um," Madison said, "Yeah, I guess."

"Yeah 'no', or yeah 'yes'?" Amy asked.

"Um, yeah no. As in, I'm not eating anymore."

"Rats," Amy said. "Then we have returned to our previous conundrum: an odd number of cookies for an even number of consumers."

"I don't think it really matters that much," Bernadette said. "You can have five and I'll have four."

"Again, that would be a violation of Fairness, which I would like to avoid if all possible."

Penny suddenly sat up rod straight and swayed just a little, almost faint. "This feels like déjà vu," she said. "I mean, seriously, I think I had this exact conversation with Sheldon one time — verbatim."

"It's highly unlikely, that you and Sheldon would have been in this identical situation," Amy said. "Besides, studies have shown that déjà vu is more commonly a result of—"

"Yep, because then he started lecturing me about déjà vu," Penny said.

Amy furrowed her brow. "But if this conversation were happening for the first time, how would —"

"THAT BITCH!" Madison screamed. She seemed to be the only one still watching the program. "Kimber Lee literally sabotaged Pinky's dinner party."

"I never liked her anyway," Penny said off-handedly and grabbed another cookie. Amy was about to cry, "Even number!" when Madison grabbed one too.

"Me neither," she said, and took a bite.

Amy slumped in her chair, muttering. "This is going to be a long night."
But she wasn't the only one who had started to swing in the other direction. Sheldon had found himself becoming Amy-fied as well.

Leonard was driving home from work, more agitated than usual. His mouth was set into a scowl, he was tapping his thumb against the steering wheel and he'd seriously considered just running over an obstinate goose that was blocking traffic three blocks back, ecological ordinances be damned. Sheldon was too busy reading to notice, although he very well might not have noticed anyway.

"Sheldon, correct me if I'm wrong—" he began, but Sheldon interrupted.

"You have my word that I will."

Leonard rolled his eyes. "You always do. Anyway... am I wrong to be annoyed that Penny is so opposed to having one lousy lunch date?" Sheldon went to answer, but Leonard continued on. "I mean, I get that sometimes I can be indecisive about what I want to eat, and sure, she does stay in contact with me during the day. But, why can't she see that sending me a text that says 'What's up, Shorty?' is not the same as having a little midday small talk over Chinese take-out? Who cares if we're going to see each other later? And—might I add—I probably won't because, ever since she's been pregnant, she goes to bed at, like, seven." Sheldon opened his mouth, but Leonard went on, seemingly forgetting that he was ever addressing his remarks to Sheldon in the first place. "And also, wanting to have lunch with my wife does not make me 'needy.' I'm not 'needy.' I mean, I'm the one trying to be reasonable here. I'm not the one pushing her away. It's the exact opposite of that."

"I believe I've heard enough," Sheldon said. Leonard turned to his passenger with something like surprise.

"Enough to do what?" he asked, annoyed. "Make a diagnosis?"

Sheldon thought on this word. "Yes. A diagnosis."

"So, you're actually going to make a 'diagnosis' of this situation?"

"I believe I can. I have been with Amy for over five years. Surely there must be something in my own relationship that would have crossover application to yours."

"Why do I doubt that?" Leonard muttered.

Sheldon cleared his throat. "Based on what I know about the mating structure of the primates with the closest social order to those of Homo sapiens, the species to which you belong—"

"The species to which I belong? What species do you belong to?"

"Homo novus," he answered. "I would imagine that Amy does, too and—if so—I could only conclude that the twins likewise would be young Homo nova."

"Sheldon, please tell me that you at least recognize that that isn't anything."

"It may not be a recognized species in official biological taxonomy today, but I assure you that history will vindicate me in the end."

Leonard shot Sheldon a sidelong glance, before turning his attention back to the road.
"So would you like to hear my diagnosis or not?" Sheldon asked.

"Oh, what the hell," Leonard sighed. "Hit me."

"As I was saying, based on what is currently known of gorillas, the female will become less gregarious while she is pregnant. Although more research remains to be done, this is likely a result of the extra expenditure of energy she experiences during gestation. Most females curtail association with males in their tribe, and seek out almost exclusive companionship with their female counterparts or with their own offspring." He paused then added. "Some also seek to engage in coitus among males of neighboring tribes. But I assure you, Leonard that, despite any advances she may hurl my way, I will not even entertain the thought betraying our friendship."

Leonard squinted with bewilderment. "You honestly think Penny might come on to you?"

"It’s a real possibility, Leonard, and one that we should at least be prepared for."

Leonard just shook his head. "Amy does it better."

"Does what better?"

"The monkey talk. Everything you say just ends up sounding like giant ass."

"Donkeys enjoy a very limited size range, Leonard," Sheldon replied. "I don't believe 'giant asses' exist."

"Oh, trust me," Leonard chuckled to himself. "They do."

After the birth of the twins, Amy's and Sheldon's late nights, long days and dogged schedule had meant that something had to go, and anything even resembling a sex life hadn't been in the queue. As the anniversary of the twins' conception had grown nearer, however, Amy had begun to think that maybe they should give non-reproductive coitus another shot.

They'd started out slow—started over, really—like high school sweethearts. Amy took to kissing Sheldon before they tucked themselves in for the night—just a quick peck of affirmation at the end of the day—and her efforts were rewarded with a contented, sleepy grin that made her heart flutter. Sometimes, when a peck got out of hand, they ended up making out a little, falling into lingering, full-mouthed kisses. But more often than not, they would stumble into cuddling in the evening while watching a movie or winding down from a stressful day. Sheldon's hand would suddenly find its way into hers; he might absently lean his head against her shoulder and almost purr as she ran her fingers through his hair; or he'd nestle in next to her and touch his forehead to hers as they fell asleep. They were small gestures (the smallest of the small) but coming from Sheldon, they made her heart swell, because she knew they didn't come from a need for sexual release or from his fetish with intelligence; such tender gestures simply said, "I need you." Sure, Sheldon and Amy would never be one of those couples, but they had never really needed to be; Amy cherished those private moments so much that she almost thought that they were enough.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: The Rock and the Tide – Joshua Radin
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Meet the twins.

Somewhere along the way, the twins stopped being tiny, leaking (though adorable) balls of constant demands and turned into real human beings. As babies, they looked so much alike, Amy had secretly had to sneak a peek in their diapers once or twice to tell them apart. But now, at "four-and-a-half years old" (as Aditi regularly liked to remind whomever would listen) their looks had long diverged. Aditi was a slight little girl, lanky and slim, with straight brown hair, expressive brown eyes and a mega-watt smile. She was partial to pigtails, and often tugged on Amy's skirt and pointed determinedly at the pink hair ties as they strolled through the aisles of Walmart. Robert wasn't much bigger, and had a darker complexion (tanning easily in the summer) with Amy's retiring, almond-shaped eyes, which contrasted with his shock of blond hair. His Batman action figure was a constant companion. Regardless of Sheldon and Amy's best efforts at predicting their children's behavior, aptitudes and actions (based on some combination of genetic analysis and the literature of one Beverly Hofstadter), the twins seemed bent on proving that the game of prediction was a game for fools. Despite the challenges involved, however, Sheldon and Amy found the whole thing fascinating.

Most of the time, anyway.

Friday night was Family Night. Or, maybe more appropriately, Family Movie Night. It started out gradually: when the twins were babies, Amy had partitioned off a section of the living room for them to toddle around and babble to each other while she and Sheldon had cherished the rare moment to actually do something together that didn't involve a double stroller or answering questions like, "Which one is the boy?" or "How come their names don't rhyme?" They'd sneak the occasional film for "big people" into their Netflix queue—provided it wasn't too loud or gory—confident that the little ones wouldn't understand. But when Aditi started forming simple phrases at ten months (and Robert soon followed), they modified their entertainment to something more appropriate for tender ears.

Right now, they were situated on the couch like they were most Fridays: Amy and Sheldon were at opposite ends of the couch, while the twins snuggled in the middle. At least they had started out that way. At the moment, Robert was leaning against Amy's shoulder and playing peak-a-boo, by himself, with her hair. Aditi had migrated to Sheldon's lap and was twirling his fingers through her own. Neither of the parents seemed to register the intrusions on their physical space, and were enraptured by the night's featured presentation: Phineas P. Gage: Neuroscience's Most Famous Victim.

"What I don't understand," Sheldon said, "is why there is such a discrepancy between the popular reports of his post-accident behavior and the reports of his physicians. I won't even mention the internal inconsistencies that appeared within the same sources."

"Gage was a fascination of his day, and neurologic wonder," Amy said. "He captured the imagination of his contemporaries."

"Considering the large majority of his 'fans' probably had less mental aptitude from the start than
he had after having an iron rod shoved through his pre-fontal cortex," Sheldon said, "that likely accounts for the fact that he could 'tour' and draw audiences. I'm baffled as to what they thought they would be seeing."

"Something different. Something alarming. You have to keep in mind that even mainstream journalism of the day were much more sensational at that time with little regard for even moderate accuracy. That, coupled with the fact that today's newspaper contains more news than many Americans at that time read in their entire lives—and he made for a pretty amazing spectacle."

It was at this time that Sheldon realized that Aditi was tapping him on the shoulder. He had the suspicion she had been doing so for a while.

"Yes?"

"Daddy," she began, pouty-lipped with furrowed brow, "what's a cellelelum?"

"DeeDee!" Robert exclaimed. He began calling her that when he first started talking and… never stopped. "It's cerebellum."

"I was asking DADDY!" she shot back.

Sheldon answered.

"It's a part of the brain," he answered. Then he looked at Amy, and she nodded her approval. He had been working on making his answers simpler ever since the now infamous "Remote Control Incident" had somehow made the twins think that there were elves living in the TV. Robert nearly electrocuted himself trying to break it open to "catch one."

"You should've asked Mommy," Robert said while twisting the head on his Batman toy, "she's the brain doctor."

"So what? Daddy's a doctor too."

"But he's not a brain doctor."

"So what? He's a cheese doctor."

Both parents looked at each other, confounded.

"I'm not a cheese doctor, Aditi," Sheldon said. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"That's what Mommy said."

This was shocking news to Amy and disturbing news for Sheldon.

"Why would you tell them I was a cheese doctor, Amy?"

"I never said anything of the sort, I assure you."

"Yes you did," Aditi said. "You said he works at a string cheese factory."

"String" was suddenly emerging as the key word. There was simply no explanation for the factory part.

"So who makes cheese then?" Robert asked.

"Cheese manufacturers… often in the state of Wisconsin," Amy answered.

Aditi's bottom lip began to tremble and she erupted in tears.

"Why are you crying?" Sheldon asked.

"Because I want you to make cheese," she said, rubbing at her eyes.

"But how in the world would I go about—" Then he paused, and there was a flicker in his eye. Amy panicked.

"Sheldon Lee Cooper, you will not be bringing any cheese-making equipment into this apartment," she said.

"Would you deprive Aditi of having the pleasure of eating freshly-churned cheese produced by her very own father?"

"Yes," Amy replied flatly.

Aditi stopped crying but was no less sad, and buried her head into Sheldon's chest. He was not pleased to find a trail of tears and snot on his "Don't Drink and Derive" T-shirt, and grabbed a nearby tissue, trying to mop it up. Robert leaned over, crouching over his sister.

"The Fart Man makes cheese," he said in a monstrous voice, then exploded into giggles.

"There is no Fart Man," Aditi whined.

"Yes there is." Then he made a fart sound.

Aditi, in spite of herself, started giggling. "No there isn't."

"Yes there is," he replied and made another fart sound. Now both children were laughing.

Inspired, Aditi made a fart sound, too. Then Robert did. It went on like that for several more exchanges as their parents watched the fart volley like a tennis match.

"Okay, that's quite enough," Sheldon said, once he'd had his fill. "Both of you stop making such disgusting sounds and return to watching the documentary."

They all looked up and turned their attention back to the television: the DVD menu was playing on loop.

Looking back now, it had been over three years ago that one Saturday—while the twins were at "Aunt Penny's"—a slow lazy morning breakfast somehow turned into sex.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, they'd gotten lost in conversation without distractions from the TV, games, work, bills or—most significantly—the twins. They talked about everything and nothing, discussing topics as diverse and varied as the uniqueness of mammalian endocrinology to why Gaston was such an underrated Disney villain. It reminded Amy of the old days—the really old days—back when she was a girl and his friend, but not his "girlfriend," and they didn't even visit each other, but would just Skype every day and talk and talk and talk.

As they chatted, they slugged away at a pile of dishes that had somehow gotten away from them.
When they finished the last dish, there was a lull, an awkward silence. Except that it wasn't awkward at all. Actually, it was kind of pleasant. Sheldon leaned down and gave her a kiss.

"What was that for?" she asked. He seemed distracted by her mouth, and answered a moment later.

"An unjustified emotional impulse," he said. They rarely kissed standing up, but the height difference between them meant that her coy smile up and his smoldering glance down ignited something primal in the couple.

He kissed her again. Longer. Much longer.

"I miss you, Amy," he said after a while. It was an absurd thing to say on the surface since they saw each other every day, but she knew what he meant because… she missed him too. She reached up and kissed him back and it was… something different. This was different.

"Sheldon," she whispered, her lips trembling. "We could…" she stopped there, looking up at his eyes. He didn't exactly answer, but there was something there, something she could see somehow, that maybe was yearning for the same thing she was yearning for. She ran a hand down his arms till she reached his hand, then gently tugged on his fingertips and started out of the kitchen, and he allowed himself to be led, following her as they made their way back to the bedroom.

They took their time (there was no rush) and, unlike their first time, it happened naturally and organically, and Sheldon seemed to be at ease and yielded, without protest, to Amy's ministrations. After the big moment, they looked at each other with heavy eyelids, and Amy placed a hand on his heaving, damp chest.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He nodded, post-coital and contented.

"Good," she said.

Reintroducing coitus to their life had opened up their relationship in a way that Amy hadn't anticipated. More than just the parents of two children, she had begun to feel that they were more like a couple, like partners… like lovers. Naturally, Amy often had to initiate their subsequent lovemaking sessions, but as their chemistry had gelled and their comfort with each other rose, Sheldon slowly became more eager and more present in the heat of the moment. The bigger obstacle was when.

Because first there was, well… work.

Sheldon had the annoying habit of bringing his work with him to bed. Oftentimes, Amy would be ready to call it a night only to come to bed and find Sheldon in hyper-focus, typing (or sometimes just staring) at his computer screen, completely enthralled with whatever he was working on. She sometimes wondered if he even knew she was there. They'd had the following conversation—word for word—about 86 times (with plus or minus three percent rate of error):

**Amy:** Are you ready to go to sleep?

**Sheldon:** (Silence)

**Amy:** (climbing into bed) Sheldon?

**Sheldon:** (slowly turns his head in her direction) Yes?
Amy: I'm going to sleep.

Sheldon: Good night.

Amy: I would like it if you turned off the computer.

Sheldon: I'll be quiet. OR I'll plug in my silent keyboard. OR I only need five more minutes.

Amy: It's the light that bothers me. OR It's quieter, not silent. OR You always say that, and then you're still working a half hour later.

Sheldon: You would have me sacrifice enlightening the world as to the great mysteries of the universe so you can have 30 more minutes of sleep?

Amy: You, too, are tired—meaning you are operating with neurocognitive impairment and growing less efficient and observant with each passing moment. Additionally, the world will not be saved tonight.

Sheldon: Fine. (Then he places his hand on the top of his laptop and brings it down slowly, closing it as if it were the door to his hotel room on the last day of a wonderful vacation.)

To reiterate, Amy found this annoying.

Then, there were the nighttime requests of the smaller members of their household. They usually came from Aditi, but occasionally Robert put in a plea as well. Ever on the prowl for new ways to delay going to sleep, they had taken 'bedtime begging' to post-modern heights. As their appeals for glasses of water, yet another trip to the bathroom and a third bedtime story fell on increasingly deafer ears, they desperately started asking if they could change into a different pair of pajamas, or for the answer to science questions their parents found irresistible, and—in one alarming episode—Robert asked for a nightcap.

Amy had searched her brain, trying to quickly assemble a kid-friendly response that explained the inappropriateness of the request and the dangers of underage drinking, when she suddenly had a realization.

"What's a nightcap?" she asked.

"A cap you wear at night," Robert answered. "Aditi has one for Hello Kitty and I think I should have one that makes me look like Batman."

Relieved (and amused), Amy assured him that such a "nightcap" could indeed be provided... on a future date.

Then there was flat-out exhaustion.

Laundry, doctors' appointments, work meetings, trips to the grocery store, traffic jams, peer-reviewed papers, antibiotics, Soft Kitty, dish washing, tub washing, hair washing, bed making, bill paying, phone calls to parents, science debates, movie debates, debate debates, meal preparation, recycling and finally pleas to sit down and to stand up and to get in the water and to get out of the water and to put the toy down and to put the toy up made both of them...

Exhausted.
And then, there were nights when neither of them were \textit{that} tired, no work had joined them in bed, and the twins had long ago fallen asleep. On those nights, they were their own worst enemies.

Sure, according to the laws of physics, a body in motion remains in motion, but that also means a body at rest remains at rest, and sometimes, Amy and Sheldon would climb into bed and simply lie there, silent victims of their own inertia. They'd stare idly at each other, wondering what the other was thinking (or maybe not) until sleep overtook them. It usually overtook Sheldon first, and Amy would watch with wistful longing as his chest rose and fell and his eyes darted around behind his eyelids.

She wondered if he ever dreamed about her.

While much of the faculty and staff of the California Institute of Technology (or Caltech) were enjoying a weekend that was already well underway, its President had just spent his Saturday shaking hands with prospective parents, schmoozing alumni and welcoming the pre-college students to the university. By the time that the sun had begun to make its way back over the horizon, Dr. Siebert had been more than ready to go home and make love to a bottle of scotch. But he would have to put off his relaxing evening just a little while longer. Pulling himself away from a rambling conversation with someone from the Board of Trustees, he remembered that the most important part of his day was yet to come. He glanced down at his watch; the time had gotten away from him. Apologizing, he excused himself, and then headed out of the building. After a quick drive, he walked determinedly up the pathway and down the hallway of the Physics Building. When he entered the conference room, he looked at the men projected on the screen and made a waving gesture.

"Sorry I'm late," Dr. Siebert said, smoothing down his tie as he took a seat. "I'm afraid my Saturday has been jam packed with activity." He turned to Dr. Gablehauser, who was already seated. "Would you be so kind as to bring me up to speed?"

"These men are the agency representatives from Washington, DC, the Department of Defense and Department of Energy, specifically. Meet Dr. Bill Anderson," he said, motioning towards each man, "and Dr. John Lively. We will be meeting them in person, as well as the representative from the Large Hadron Collider, at the Meeting of the Science Education Commission in two weeks."

"Yes," Dr. Lively said, "As we were explaining to Dr. Gablehauser, this venture will publicly be about educational outreach, and so will be advertised and presented as such to any who ask. But in reality, this endeavor will be as a research project that will have, what we believe to be, a tremendous impact on the world as we know it, with applications ranging from alternative energy sources to uses that would be of interest to the Department of Defense. This is a major undertaking that will have major implications for this nation and beyond, and we are not taking this lightly. We trust that as a participating member, Dr. Siebert, you won't as well."

Dr. Siebert looked at Gablehauser.

"Of course," he said, sitting forward a bit. "We fully understand the enormity of the endeavor, and are eager to fulfill any role that we can."

Bill spoke up. "That's good to hear. Now that that has been established, we would like to inform you that we've conducted a thorough search, and seen that Caltech has a long history of success with multi-million dollar research projects, benefits from an ideal location, and boasts a very strong research team. Therefore, it is our first choice as the base institution for our operations."

Dr. Siebert looked flattered, though he was sincerely surprised. "Though I assure you that Caltech
will more than exceed your expectations, I anticipated you selecting an institution on the East Coast. California's a long way from DC, much less Europe, and I know MIT was an early contender."

"Of course," John said. "But California is the only state that has three participating institutions. Besides…" He paused. "Caltech has Dr. Cooper. It is our intent to make him the lead theorist on the project."

This was news as well. Sheldon was notoriously difficult to work with and the thought of him having such a critical role wasn't sitting well with Dr. Siebert. "I'm sorry. Dr. Cooper?" he asked.

Bill and John looked at each other quizzically. "The theorist who published those recent papers on the Higgs boson particle," Dr. Lively explained.

"Of course, I know who he is; I just didn't realize he had been selected." Then he regretted the statement. "Of course, he is an elite scientist and you will not regret your decision."

There was a moment of silence between all men.

"So then you accept our proposal of Caltech?" John asked.

Dr. Siebert nodded. "It's an honor, really."

"And facility space?" Bill asked.

Dr. Gablehauser answered. "There is a building available for your use, as well as our full cooperation in performing whatever modifications to that space that may be needed."

Bill nodded. "And will we be able to meet with Dr. Cooper as scheduled?"

"Absolutely," Dr. Siebert answered. "We should all be able to shake on it at the conference in two weeks."

Bill smiled. "Then if there is nothing else, thank you."

"There is one more thing," John said. The gathered men turned to him. "Considering the scale of this endeavor, discretion—even secrecy—is absolutely necessary. We trust that you all will be able to comply with that."

"You have my word," Dr. Siebert said, "as well that of my faculty."

"Excellent," Bill said. "We'll be contacting you again soon."

All men exchanged farewells and the screen went black. When it did, Dr. Siebert's previous cheer disappeared.

"Eric," he said, rising from his chair. "I don't need to tell you that there is a lot riding on this. I trust that you will be able to supervise Sheldon for the duration of this project. We cannot afford to have his stubborn nature fuck this up for this University."

Dr. Gablehauser nodded vigorously, a little on edge. "Of course. I'm in full control of the situation. You shouldn't expect anything less."

"I won't," Dr. Siebert said sternly, and promptly left.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Apparently, "opinionation" is not a word.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How long did you and your sister share a room?" Amy asked Sheldon during a commercial break of *The Antiques Roadshow*. She and Sheldon watched it on the occasional Monday night, and the program had a way of making her want to pull her forgotten treasures out of storage purgatory. One of her grandmother's broaches *alone* should have been worth enough to buy a portable modular transcranial magnetic stimulation device she'd had her eye on.

Meanwhile, Sheldon was spending his commercial break reading up on the finer points of Green Lantern mythology.

He shrugged. "Not in memory. I spent my childhood as the bottom tenant of a bunk bed that the upper tenant—my brother—used as a place to indulge in his twin hobbies of polishing his hunting rifle and polishing his other rifle."

It was information Amy could have done without. "That is, quite likely, the worst lead-in I could have possibly received for my next point." She thought a moment. "Or, more disturbingly, it might have been the best lead-in to my next point."

Sheldon turned to her. "What point is that?"

Her point was that she and Sheldon's valiant attempt at turning the bachelor pad on the fourth floor of 2311 Los Robles was starting to falter. Initially, they had doubled up the cribs in Leonard's old room, and then (after pulling yet another U-Haul trailer full of her stuff down the West Coast) Amy had crammed her harp, clothes and other important possessions into wherever there was space. The rest of her things had gone into storage, and with some goading (and after extensive deliberation on Sheldon's part) some of his things had gone into storage as well. However, as the twins grew, so did the *stuff*: there were more clothes, more toys (Sheldon's included), more beds, more food, more… everything. The small apartment (that Amy had always thought of as a pit stop on their way to bigger and better things) had gotten smaller by the minute as their lives expanded. Lately, she began to think a change was in order.

"I think it's time that the twins had their own rooms."

Sheldon turned towards her, then back down to his book. "I imagine you're right." He paused. "And considering that this apartment only has two bedrooms, I assume you are implying that we should move somewhere else."

Amy nodded. "Naturally."

"Then I'll speak with the landlord tomorrow to find out if there are vacancies elsewhere in the building."
Amy pursed her lips. "Or… we could start conversations on buying a house." Sheldon turned to her with a look of unadulterated terror. "Come on, Sheldon, our credit is perfect and I think with a little planning, we could secure a downpayment."

"But, but, but… where would we do laundry?"

"In our own washer and dryer."

"And, how could we get cupcakes from the bakery on the corner?"

"That isn't the only bakery in the world, Sheldon."

"But where would they send our mail? I have a lot of important correspondence I absolutely must receive, Amy."

"Sheldon, honestly," she replied in disbelief at his mounting desperation.

He turned down then looked back up, sadness in his eyes.

"And what about Leonard and Penny?"

"Aww," Amy said. She drew closer to him on the couch, placing a hand on his lap. "We can always pop over for a visit. That's what I did when I used to live by myself, remember?"

Having successfully routed all of his suggestions; Sheldon was now at a loss for words. He looked no less mortified however.

"Surely you couldn't have been planning to live here forever," she said.

He pouted a little, returning to his book and sullenly turning a page. "The thought had crossed my mind."

Her tone softened some, but she was no less decided. "Sheldon, I know you are reluctant to change, but, we only live once. I think it's time we created new experiences for our family."

Amy watched as his pout faded and he began to wrap his mind around the idea. "Fine," he said, putting on a face that Amy associated with his most serious of undertakings. "I'll begin mapping the surrounding area for suitable neighborhoods for our relocation." Predictably, he grabbed his laptop, opening the lid. "Where's the website for registered sex offenders, again?" he asked. Before she could answer, something on the TV caught their attention.

"And, how much did you say you paid for this tin cup?" the appraiser asked.

The little old man wearing overalls only shrugged. "My neighbor gave it to me thirty years ago to drink out of after I mowed her lawn."

"Then you'll be happy to know that, at auction, it could bring between $150,000 and $250,000."

"Oh my," the man said, and put his hand to his forehead, almost faint. "I never reckoned it would be worth so much."

Frozen with his hand on the lid of his laptop, and leveling a cool glare at the television, Sheldon seemed as agitated as he was amazed.

"We're going on that blasted show the next time it comes anywhere near the West Coast, Amy," he declared.
Her thoughts drifted to the boxes (plural) of mint-condition comic books that were sitting in the closet where her shoes should be, and nodded. "Indeed we should," she said.

The thing was, buying a house took planning… and money.

Amy was making a pot of spaghetti as she and Sheldon hammered out the details for another month's round of expenses. Their expenditures increased with each passing billing period, and Sheldon's once-comfortable (though always moderate) salary seemed to be shrinking before their eyes. Adding insult to injury, they had brought with them from their single lives a long list of ways to flush money down the toilet: subscriptions to magazines they never read; membership to operas, amusement parks and museums they rarely visited; and automatic bank payments for online gaming, fruit-of-the-month clubs, and something that kept coming up on their statement as CYE2135MST498 (turns out it was traveler's club). Little by little—and always after spirited debate—they whittled away at these unnecessary expenses right up until their quality of life would be seriously threatened. But after yet another tight month, there was still fat to be cut, and Mickey Mouse was starting to look like the next sacrificial lamb.

"How about our season passes to Disneyland?" Amy suggested. Those surely could be cut.

"Perish the thought," Sheldon said without hesitation.

"It doesn't have to be forever," Amy explained. "We could get them again when they're a little older."

"And meanwhile suck the wonder and whimsy from our young children's lives?" he said aghast. "I think not."

"Somehow I don't think it's their whimsy that you're thinking of," she muttered.

Robert suddenly appeared in the kitchen.

"Daddy, may I have a cookie?"

"It's almost time for supper," he said, "and you know that if you have a snack now your appetite will suffer accordingly."

"Please?" Robert begged.

"No. We'll be eating soon. Now go to your room and keep going over those elements of the periodic table flash cards with your sister until it's time to eat."

He looked up his father, accepting the verdict with pouty-lipped disappointment. He lingered for a moment, as if contemplating his next move. Then he suddenly walked off.

Meanwhile, Sheldon thought of something else they could cut. "What about your gym membership?"

Amy stood back, agape. "My gym membership is non-negotiable."

Sheldon was taken at that response. "I can't imagine why."

"Very simple: it's been nearly five years since I had the twins and I still can't lose the last 18 pounds of baby fat."

"Well, how long has it been since you've actually gone to the gym?"
"I went three times last week."

"Really?" Sheldon said, surprised. "I didn't realize you were going that regularly. If I may ask, what do you do? Walk the treadmill? Take a cardio class? Do a bit of resistance training?"

"I had lunch there in the café," she explained. "They have an amazing in-house chef who says he grew up in the same town as Rachael Ray, and all their options are amazingly low fat."

"Growing up in the same hometown as Rachael Ray is a distinction of dubious value, Amy, and I hardly think it is a sound use of resources to pay $36 a month for the privilege to then pay to have lunch at the gym."

"I have every intention of returning to my exercise routine. Wouldn't you like it if I weren't so... fat?" she asked.

"Amy, your self-perceived fatness, or lack thereof, has absolutely no bearing on my opinion of you."

It was a sweet sentiment. But she still felt fat.

"This excess flab has taken up near-permanent residency around my belly—with wanton disregard for my wishes—and resists all attempts at eviction."

Aditi suddenly appeared in the kitchen.

"Daddy, can I have a cookie?"

Sheldon patted her head.

"It's almost time for dinner," he said. "You'll be eating soon."

"But, I'm hungry now," she whined.

He walked towards the cookie jar and lifted the lid. "In some nations," he continued in response to Amy, "England for example, squatters who have resided in a business or residential property can claim sovereignty of said property after a legally established period of time, regardless of the property's original ownership or who holds the deed." He handed Aditi a cookie.

"Can I have another one, please?" she asked. He reached in and handed her another one. She skipped off merrily.

"So if you are looking to 'evict,' as you say, the fat that has taken up residence in your gut, I recommend that you do so forthwith, as the statute of limitations is quickly approaching."

Amy just shook her head. "Do you see what just happened there?"

"Yes," he answered. "I summarized the legality of a real estate loophole in Great Britain, and you silently dismissed it."

"No," Amy said. "I'm talking about with your daughter."

"My daughter?" he repeated. "You say that with a hint of accusation."

"When Robert asked for a cookie, you absolutely refused him. However, when Aditi came back, you relented without so much as a bat of an eyelash."
"I reminded her of the impending dinner."

"A perfunctory gesture at best."

"She was hungry, Amy," Sheldon said. "I wouldn't want her to be hungry."

"Sheldon, she just said that so that you would cave in. She would have said the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain if she thought it would have persuaded you to comply with her wishes."

"*My Fair Lady* reference—nice," he said delightedly.

"Thank you," she said, while stirring the pot. Sheldon grabbed four plates and walked out to the dining table where his and Leonard's workstations had once been.

"I think you are mistaken with Aditi. You make her out to be a manipulative urchin while I believe her motives are innocent, albeit misguided."

"*She* is not the manipulative urchin," Amy said. "*Robert* is."

"And how does that even make any sense? Robert walked back to the room without putting up a fight."

"How many cookies did Aditi ask for?"

"One… then two."

"And I assure you that Robert, who is quickly shaping up to be the alpha twin, was the mastermind behind this little coup. If we go back right now, I bet we'll find him sneakily snacking on a snickerdoodle."

"Alliteration! You're really on a roll, Amy Farrah Fowler."

She curtsied.

"Fine," Sheldon conceded. "I'm willing to have a look."

He crept back towards their room, trying to remain undetected, and Amy followed behind. The two children were sitting Indian style and facing each other. In one of Robert's hands was a flash card; in the other was a half-eaten cookie. Another partially eaten cookie was on his lap.

Sheldon gasped.

"A-U," Robert said.

"Aluminum?" she answered hesitantly.

"No Aditi; the answer is 'gold'. You should know that one by now."

"How am I supposed to remember that?" she said, frustrated. "Aluminum starts with 'A'. Gold starts with, guh, guh, guh, 'G'."

Sheldon and Amy backed away from the door.

"That little manipulator," Sheldon said, aghast.

"I didn't even imagine he would have both cookies," Amy conceded.
"Such duplicity requires reprimand," he said.

"Actually, you are as much to blame as he is."

"Amy, left unchecked, you would place the blame of the world on my shoulders."

Amy ignored the comment. "You have all but conditioned them through your preferential treatment to behave in such a matter."

"I heartily deny that assertion."

"Of course you do. But, Aditi is your Achilles heel." Sheldon scrunched up his face. "It is a not a matter of shame, Sheldon. Have you ever heard of the Electra complex?"

"Yes," he replied. "Such sexual dynamics are prominently featured in science fiction. And, for the record, I think it is complete hokum."

"Well, while the sexual components are up for debate, the fact that daughters and fathers share a special bond is widely supported by both anecdotal and scientific evidence."

"Oh, so just tag 'scientific evidence' on the end it and that makes it so?"

"Kind of like your reason for collecting trains is that 'scientific evidence shows that train play improves spatial skills?'"

"That is indisputable truth!" Sheldon insisted.

"I'm sure it is, dear," Amy said and, scooping up some spaghetti sauce in a spoon, fed some to Sheldon. After a rather protracted show of swishing the red sauce in his mouth, he almost seemed pleased, but hesitated and his face fell into an innocent, almost helpless, expression.

"Are you going to cut up hotdogs and add them in the sauce?" he whined, sounding all of five years old and looking uncannily like Aditi.

"I already did," Amy assured him.

"And are we going to have Texas Toast?"

Amy nodded. "Of course."

"And Parmesan cheese?"

"Yes, Sheldon. And Parmesan cheese."

He smiled widely and walked off to round up the children. "Good. Then let's eat."

Sheldon got to work and opened his email. It was filled with the normal mix of physics jokes, conference invitations, ongoing discussions with colleagues and then… something more alarming. He immediately rose and set off to take up the matter with the University President.

After scouring the school and engaging in a bitter run-in with the President's Office receptionist, Sheldon was only five minutes into his conversation with Dr. Siebert when he realized he wasn't going to get the results he wanted.

"Dr. Cooper," Dr. Siebert replied, "why aren't you having this conversation with Dr. Gablehauser?"
"I never get anywhere with him. Besides, if all possible, I prefer not to deal with middle men."

"He's not a middle man—he's your boss."

"Which is why I'm frankly surprised you don't find it more alarming when he comes to incorrect conclusions."

"Look, Dr. Cooper. It's just a little meeting in Washington, DC. You go, learn a little about how to inspire youth, attend a couple cocktail parties and come home. You might even get to rub shoulders with some of the deep pockets in our nation's capital."

"I have no more desire to rub any part of me against a politician, sir, than I have desire to contracting a deadly virus. And there's a real chance I could do both."

Dr. Siebert sighed. "It should not find it distasteful to participating in extracurricular activities. There's a chance one of these things just might make you an appealing candidate for higher positions at the University, Dr. Cooper. It's an aspiration greater men would covet."

"Greater men?" Sheldon snorted. "I certainly doubt that."

"If I'm being honest, the University simply asks you to make an occasional contribution to the functioning of the Physics Department. For the life of me, I cannot figure out why you are so opposed to being an active participant of this institution."

"I participate actively by exploring the bounds of higher math, publishing papers and lending my mental prowess to the educational program."

"And what, exactly, is everybody else doing?"

"I couldn't be bothered to know, although word on the street is that Dr. Perry has been taking hour-and-a-half lunch breaks and using the color printer for personal projects." He looked at Dr. Siebert with a knowing look. "If you really want to shape up the department, I would suggest you start there."

Dr. Siebert had heard enough. "Dr. Cooper, you will be attending that meeting, you will do so with a smile on your face, and you will recognize that I am the President of this university—not the complaint dump—so STOP coming to me with every little gripe. I am just as preoccupied with the thespians of the Drama Department as I am with the lab techs of the Physics Department."

Sheldon recoiled. "I might make another suggestion as to where resources are being wasted."

"Have a nice day, Dr. Cooper," Dr. Siebert said, and walked off.

Sheldon took the matter to Amy later that night as they cleaned the kitchen. The fridge needed special attention.

"You know, Amy," Sheldon said, capping off a protracted complaint as he scraped off what looked like dried up apple sauce from the bottom shelf. "I often envy the days of Galileo, Newton and Einstein. Those men lived in simpler times, times when they could work in their private chambers, completely unbothered by the intrusions of their 'department chairs' or forced to attend meetings to placate inferior minds." He shook his head in pure disgust.

"While they may not have faced those problems in particular," Amy countered, "you can't have forgotten those scientists had troubles of their own: Galileo's findings nearly got him executed on
charges of heresy, Newton got embroiled in a bitter scandal over who discovered calculus, and Einstein had to flee to America under the threat of being murdered by the Nazis.

Sheldon nodded. "Then I sympathize with them. When I suffer for my science, I find myself in good company."

Amy turned her mouth at that. "I do understand the fierce loyalty you have to the purer tenants of science, but…"

Sheldon turned to her when she paused. "But what?"

"But sometimes I am baffled as to how someone in your position can find room to complain."

"In what position?"

"Every day you have the opportunity to devote yourself to fulfilling work in a field that you not only find fascinating, but that you excel at. Additionally, you are widely respected for said work and receive accolades by your peers and superiors. While no occupation is without its downside, you are in a very enviable position."

"Enviable?"

"I just mean that some people, regardless of their abilities or talents or interests, by necessity, must find occupation elsewhere in things that… may bring less glory or… or mental stimulation, or…" she trailed off.

Sheldon seemed chastened by the statement. "So are you saying that I have to go to the meeting?"

Amy was confused. "Didn't you have to go to it anyway?"

"Yes, but… at first I had every intention of attending it with a stance of disdain. Now you are saying that I should consider myself fortunate to be able to attend?"

"That's not exactly what I mean, Sheldon. It's just… I guess I'm saying—"

She was interrupted when Aditi walked out with Robert trailing behind her, Batman in tow.

"Daddy," Aditi said. "If I eat too many Red Vines will I die?"

"Well," Sheldon began, "considering their scant nutritional value but high caloric content—with most of those calories coming from carbohydrates—eating 'too many Red Vines' may contribute to your premature demise in the long run from diet-related maladies like obesity, hypertension or diabetes. Even so, I doubt you would be able to eat enough in a single sitting to bring about sudden death."

Some days his explanations were better than others, and both children looked at their father with puzzled looks. Aditi turned to her mother.

"He's right," Amy said, answering the question on her face. "But for your purposes, the answer is no."

"I TOLD YOU!" Aditi yelled.

"But," Robert protested confidently, "you might turn into a Red Vine. I saw that in a cartoon. A boy ate too many Red Vines and he turned into one." Amy heard her phone ringing in the other room and went off to answer it.
"Daddy," Aditi tried again. "If I eat too many Red Vines will I *turn into* a Red Vine?"

"What do you think?" Sheldon said, in an effort to have her draw her own conclusions. Besides, this kind of questioning sometimes went on for hours. It was like living with a four-and-a-half-year-old Raj. Just she was cuter. And not Indian.

Aditi furrowed her brow, and stuck out her tongue just a little, collecting the available evidence and processing it in her young mind. "Well, in my opinionation—"

"It's opinion, Aditi," he interrupted.

"No," Robert corrected him, "I believe it is *opinionation*, Dad." Sheldon turned to him in disbelief.

"I assure you it's *not*." He looked at his son again with continued bewilderment. "Why would you believe otherwise?"

"Well," Robert began, twisting the head on his action figure, "Aunt Penny says it all the time."


Leonard opened the door.

"Good evening, Sheldon," he said. "By the look on your face, it seems you are here to annoy me."

"Actually, I'm here to *scold* Penny," he corrected.

"You will be scolding *no one*."

"Where is she?"

"Not *here*."

"But I need to speak with her."

"On some level you do realize that just because you need to speak with someone doesn't mean they'll just *materialize* out of thin air, don't you?"

At that moment, Penny appeared at the top of the stairs.

"You underestimate the power of Dr. Sheldon Cooper," he said with a smirk.

"Hey, Sheldon," she said without looking up while rifling through her mail. She walked past him and towards the apartment, but stopped when Sheldon called her name.

"Penny, what does the word 'opinionation' mean?"

"*Sheldon,* Leonard said, annoyed.

"I got this," she said, stopping him. Leonard shook his head and sighed. She paused, thought a little, and then came up with her answer.

"It's kind of like opinion, but it's like when you're *coming up* with your opinion. That's it!" she said excitedly. "It's when you *formulate* an opinion. See? Formulation plus opinion equals, *ta-da*, opinionation."

Sheldon looked at her with the haughty derision he was famous for, and then held up his iPad in
front of her face. She squinted at the screen. It was a Google results search page for the word "opinionation" and it only had a couple YouTube videos from a 90s television program and a header that said, "Did you mean: opinionated."

"Fine; it's not a word," she said, with a shrug. "You came all the way over here to tell me that?"

"No, I came over here to tell you to refrain from speaking to my children anymore."

"That's ridiculous, Sheldon," Leonard said. "They love coming over here. We're their Uncle Leonard and Aunt Penny."

"I didn't say they couldn't come over here anymore, simply that Penny couldn't talk to them. And, Uncle Leonard, I should mention that your verbal rights remain unrevoked, barring a similar linguistic transgression on your part."

"So, uh, Sheldon," Penny began, "how the hell am I supposed to spend time with them if I can't even talk to them."

"Oh, I'm sure you all can devise some system of communication: perhaps sign-language or pantomime. Maybe when you play school, one of the twins can volunteer to be the teacher. You just might learn something."

"You're crazy," she said and walked through the door.

"I'm not crazy," Sheldon called out behind her, "my mother had me tested. AND my grammar is impeccable."

"Bye," Leonard said and shut the door.

In the weeks following their decision to find a house of their own, Amy and Sheldon would snatch moments from their busy schedule to work towards that goal. They spent a lunch break here, an hour after work there, an occasional detour after a trip to the grocery store, and many a late night online combing through potential houses throughout Pasadena and the surrounding areas. But soon, it became clear that their fragmented search methods weren't good enough, and they stole one Saturday for a day of dedicated house-hunting. Never the kind to leave things to chance, they constructed a plan that articulated their main priorities, maximized their house-hunting efforts, and got them to the most homes in a single day. After a long morning, a harried lunch, and what was turning into a relentless afternoon, their travails had brought them… here.

ENDNOTE: (1) Beta love? I got it. (2) Thanks for lending me your eyeballs. (3) Feedback saves the puppies!

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Father and Daughter – Paul Simon
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Home is where the heart is.

Sheldon and Amy sat in their parked car outside and squinted at the Google maps picture on her phone and then through the windshield at the home to their left. The matching images confirmed that they had, indeed, come to the right place: 369 Matney Avenue. The brick rancher was mediocre at best: the shudders were an inviting shade of blue and the house had an endearing cut-tile pathway to the door. But it looked smaller than it should, at least according to the square footage in the pamphlet. It was painted a sad off-white, and that paint was chipping near the foundation. The grass in the front yard was patchy, pale and pitiful—where there was even grass at all. There was a cracked bird bath out front.

They sighed in unison.

"It looked better in the ad," Amy said, staring forlornly at her wilting dream.

Sheldon matched her apathy. "They always do," he muttered.

Feeling something between discouragement and fatigue, Amy started rifling through the folder on her lap that was filled with weeks' worth of pamphlets, business cards, print-outs and napkins scribbled with handwritten notes. "Why didn't we like the house on Pebble Trail, again? It had a nice kitchen."

Sheldon lethargically peeked over at the paper then back out of the window. "They were asking too much."

"And didn't you like the entertainment room in the one on Stony Blvd?"

"Moldy carpet."

"What about the one on Maple's Edge?"

"Street parking."

"And the one on Harbor Canyon?"

"Ant infestation."

"Diamond Way?"

"Too big."

"Jefferson Street?"

"Too small."

"Tawny Turtle Terrace?"
"Stupid street name."

"Hold on," Amy said perking up. "this one on Terra Vista wasn't so bad." She pointed to a glossy flyer. "Maybe we should give it another shake."

"Nope," Sheldon said resolutely. "No way, no how. That house was across the street from a traveling troupe of acrobatic midgets."

Amy looked at Sheldon with complete bewilderment. "How do you know?"

"Because I saw their van parked in the driveway."

She had never heard that detail before and wondered why Sheldon hadn't mentioned it earlier. Then, on second thought, she wasn't sure she even cared. "What's the matter with midgets? Maybe we could get free entertainment at birthday parties."

Sheldon turned to her with big eyes and a crouching posture. He was deadly serious.

"Acrobatic midgets are mini clowns, Amy." He paused. "I don't like clowns."

"Fine, then," she said, opening her door. "Let's give 369 Matney Avenue a whirl."

The day after yet another unfruitful Saturday of house-hunting, Amy had a funeral on Sunday to look forward to. It had been months since she had even laid eyes on anyone that she shared DNA with (other than the twins) and her absence had elicited more than one grumble on Facebook walls and Twitter feeds, giving her the impression that maybe she should check back in. She saw the unfortunate occasion of her aunt's funeral as a chance to make up for lost time, and so decided to spend the entire day in Glendale. Assuming she survived the ordeal, she'd be back in time for a bedtime story, but the plan meant that Sheldon would be with the twins. All day. Alone.

It gave her pause.

"I've kept the children many times before," he said after stumbling upon yet another post-it note, this one attached to a lamp. "Your concern is excessive." he leaned forward whispering. "And frankly insulting."

"You've never minded the children all day, alone, on a weekend before. Their care will involve the preparation of two meals and as many snacks, the coordination of at least eight hours of play and education, as well as the enforcement of naptime, bath time and bedtime and any disciplinary resistance those activities may provoke. Throw in trips to the bathroom, an occasional fight and their insistence on performing life-threatening stunts, and it amounts to a day not meant for the faint of heart. There will be no reprieve, Sheldon, and you must stay on your toes."

"I assure you that I will be so 'on my toes,' I will be the envy of ballet prima donnas the world over."

"Very well, then," Amy said grabbing her purse, "if you get into any snafus and I can't be reached, Penny is right across the hall."

Sheldon was horrified by this suggestion. "You offend me, Amy. Penny is in no way, shape or form more capable of addressing any incident that may transpire than I am. In fact, as their father and genetic progenitor, I am infinitely more capable."

"Fine," Amy said. "On that note, I best be on my way." She got up on her tip toe for a kiss, then
dropped down in front of the kids. "Love you," she said, hugging each one. "Be good for Daddy."

The twins nodded, and then Amy opened the door and left.

Sheldon turned around and saw the twins sitting on the couch, kicking their legs up in the air and staring back blankly at their father. Sheldon surveyed his offspring and immediately moved towards the first order of business.

"Aditi?"

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Get up. You're in my spot."

With Amy out of the door and on her way, Sheldon began to reflect on the day ahead of him. Like the singing nun out of some Nazi-era musical, he would have confidence in himself to deal with whatever the twins threw his way. For heaven's sakes, he was a theoretical physicist. On a daily basis, he tackled some of the most daunting conundrums ever to challenge the human mind. This would be, in the most literal sense, child's play.

He looked at his watch; it was 9:12 AM. While their minds were still fresh, it would be best to use this opportunity to teach a little lesson on the unique role of hydrogen in the universe. He tried to recall where his video on reactive gases was. Then he remembered he could probably do the job just as well with what was in the kitchen.

"Who wants to learn about hydrogen!" he said enthusiastically, clapping his hands together.

Both kids raised their hands, waving them around with gusto. "WE DO!" they cried.

"Great," Sheldon said and started towards the kitchen. His children followed behind him like little ducklings, and Sheldon looked back at them excitedly over his shoulder. "Now for this lesson we will need two bowls of water and a handful of ice cubes—" He paused, and then tapped his chin.

"Maybe two glasses would work better."

"Daddy," Aditi said, pulling on his pant leg. "I'm hungry."

Sheldon looked down at his daughter with surprise. "But you just ate breakfast," he said.

"But I'm hungry again. I want some oatmeal."

And here it was, the first challenge of the day: to re-feed or not to re-feed. It was a simple issue with an undoubtably simple solution. Sheldon conducted a brief review of the facts. Aditi had just eaten, and so it was possible that she wasn't actually hungry. If so, she could be asking to eat again to get attention. Or it was possible that she actually was hungry, as she was a growing girl and thusly used a disproportionate number of calories in relation to her size. Or perhaps she wasn't hungry, and had been put up to it by Robert, the affable but manipulative alpha twin. Or perhaps she was hungry and had gotten a smaller portion than Sheldon remembered. Or perhaps she wasn't hungry and she simply enjoyed eating with no regard to the perils of childhood obesity. Or perhaps she was hungry because she had a tapeworm or some kind of vitamin deficiency that was causing her to crave nutrients only found in oats.

"Daddy," she whined again, "can I have some oatmeal, please?"

Sheldon stared at her with pure panic.
"I don't know. I'm going to go and ask Penny."

As luck would have it, an accident on I-134 turned six miles of freeway into a parking lot, and Amy arrived late to the 10:00 AM funeral service. Sneaking through the eulogy already in progress, she sat in the back pew far away from the rest of her family. Her late arrival also meant that she was parked quite a distance from the church and, as a result, she got separated from the funeral procession and ended up missing the burial service as well. In the end, the first she saw of the family was at the repast held at her aunt's house. She got out of her car and walked up to the door. She paused a moment to collect herself from the turmoil of the previous couple hours, then took a deep breath and rang the bell. The door swung open to reveal her older cousin Mae, who was wearing a bright smile that seemed less than appropriate for the solemn occasion. She greeted Amy.

"AMY!" she squealed. "So glad you could make it. We thought you were the one who'd died!"

"I just might," Amy muttered, and followed her inside.

Sheldon walked across the hall and rapped on Penny's door... for the sixth time that day. He had only made it through the second round of knocks and "Pennys" when she swung the door open, clearly annoyed.

"Sheldon," she said, gripping the sides of the door jamb with both hands, "if the Hot Pockets are still too hot, you're just gonna have to stick 'em in the freezer for a couple seconds. But, really, there's nothing else I can tell you."

Sheldon pulled his mouth into a straight line. "And those hasty remarks have nothing to do with my presence here," he said, and then turned away. "Although that is good to know for future reference."

She relaxed some. "Then what do you want?"

"I am here to inform you that the children would like to invite you over for tea and crumpets. Right now."

While the "Knock, knock, knock Penny" in her was still cooling off, the "Aunt Penny" in her was hopelessly amused... and a little flattered. "Really?" she said, a smile sneaking onto her face.

"Yes. And by tea, I mean cold water served in a tin kettle with plastic cookies."

That sounded less appetizing, but no less cute.

"I accept their invitation," she said, then grabbed her keys and started to lock the door when Sheldon spoke.

"You're going dressed like that?" he asked.

She looked down at her ensemble of a Rihanna Navy T-shirt that barely fit anymore, destroyed jeans and flip-flops and then back up at Sheldon. It was then that she realized he was wearing a fedora and a sports jacket. It was the first time she had ever seen him in a hat.

"Why? Do I have to dress up or something?" she asked.

Sheldon wilted rather dramatically. "Tsk, tsk, tsk," he said, shaking his head. "Are you aware that
most tea parties require that the invited guests adhere to a strict dress code that does not include a concert T-shirt and jeans with holes in them?"

"Well," Penny countered, "most 'tea parties' actually serve tea."

"And now you mock their little fete?" he asked.

"Of course not," she sighed. "Fine, I'll go and change." She went back inside, hurriedly pulled off her clothes, and threw on a lightweight cotton maternity dress she'd been putting off wearing. As she turned to leave, a straw hat she never wore caught her eye. She decided to put it on as well. As she walked back to the door, she glanced at a mirror and realized that... she'd didn't look half bad.

"There," she asked Sheldon, after re-emerging, "how do I look?"

"Presentable," he said nonchalantly, and they both crossed back to his apartment. When she entered the door, she was greeted to a scene of both children positioned around the coffee table and sitting in little plastic chairs. Aditi was wearing a pair of Amy's high heels, a pink, floppy-brimmed hat and a feather boa. Robert had on blue blazer and a Batman hat (with ears and all) that came down just far enough to need slits for his eyes. At her entry, both kids hopped up and ran to her.

"AUNT PENNY!" they squealed and hugged her knees. She wrapped her arms around them.

"What are you playing?" she asked.

"We're having a tea party!" Aditi yelled.

"And I'm Batman," Robert explained.

"Great. So am I invited?"

Both children nodded their heads.

"Great!" Penny said. "I love tea parties." She walked over and sat down, cramming her butt into one of the tiny chairs. "Aren't you gonna join us, Sheldon?" she called over her shoulder, but she didn't get a response.

When she turned around, she found Sheldon smiling absently at his brood. In fact, he hadn't even noticed that she was talking to him, and his face was some mix of silent wonder and pride. Seeing him like that, as just Sheldon the Dad, endeared Penny to him and made her even more excited to meet for her own child in a couple months. She turned back to the twins.

"How about we just get started?"

While the day had not turned out to be the worst day Amy had spent with her family, it definitely had managed to crack the Top Ten. The low points were trying to convince her nosy cousin Janie that Sheldon's absence did not mean they were "on the verge of divorce" and then (more upsettingly) trying to explain why they weren't already married. Amy had also managed to track bubble gum into the house on the bottom of her shoe, which caused a minor commotion. The highlights of the day, however, included a chat with her cousin about the challenges and rewards of tandem breastfeeding and a heavenly slice of carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. As the late afternoon drug on, however, there was little holding Amy there, and she decided to leave a little early. After kissing her mom (and about 500 other women) goodbye, she got in her car and took off.
When she arrived, she didn't get out and instead just sat awhile, staring at the building beside her. Being just a little after sunset, it looked all dressed up under the glow of the flood lights. No matter where she went, this was the place she kept coming back to. This was the place she called home.

Not the apartment at 2311 Los Robles. That, of course, was her actual home. But after stumbling upon this house in Burbank a few weeks ago, she had seen the "For Sale" sign out front with a number to call and had made the mistake of scheduling a tour. From outside it was vivid and inviting, and even though it was smaller than some other places, it seemed to peek out from behind a smattering of trees, coyly beckoning her to come inside. When she did, she was soon taken with its features: beautiful hardwood floors, a den with a stonewall interior, three nice-sized bedrooms and two baths, a stately fireplace, and then the windows—so many windows that light flooded generously into every nook and crevice of every room, making the home sunny and bright. As if to dispel any lingering doubts as to the suitability of the place, she and the realtor had stepped out onto the back patio (what a wonderful patio it was) and looked out at a spacious back yard on the over-sized lot.

And then she'd asked how much. The price of the house was several thousand dollars above their price range, but Amy didn't say anything. Instead, she'd tried to find out if there was any flexibility in the price, but the woman had just shaken her head; the owners had made many of the upgrades to the home themselves, and were hesitant to take a loss on its value. Amy had nodded, assured the woman she would be in touch, shaken her hand and driven home.

Amy had walked away that day, but she'd never really left. Against her better judgment, she sometimes fantasized about having guests over and grilling on the patio, then inviting everyone in for cocktails by the fireplace as the nighttime temperatures fell. She imagined weekends when she would call the children in from play and then crowd them around the kitchen table for an afternoon of baking in her modern kitchen with state-of-the-art appliances. There was even an office with room for two desks, and she pictured Sheldon in one corner and herself in the other, pouring over the laptops, books and composition notebooks, exploring the depths of the atom and the human brain in tandem.

Sometimes she just drove out here and looked at it, like tonight.

After a few minutes, Amy turned the key in the ignition, backed the car out of the driveway, and headed back to the interstate. She had to get back to Sheldon and the kids. She missed them and, besides, she was more than a little curious to know how they had fared without her.

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Amy wrangled with the door and her misshapen key (another thing on her to-do list) and finally walked through the front door a little after eight o'clock. She entered to find both children were quietly reading. Robert was stretched out on the couch on his belly, reading one of Sheldon's books that appeared to be about sub-Saharan Africa. Aditi had tucked herself into Sheldon's spot, and was reading *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* quietly.

"Hey kids!" Amy said and, stooping down, reached out for a hug, but instead of being greeted by her children skipping towards her, both kids put stern fingers over their mouths.

"Shhh," Robert said.

"Daddy's sleeping," Aditi explained. She pointed forward, and it was then that Amy noticed Sheldon on the other side of the coffee table, also on his belly, but lying on the floor. Face down. In a pile of toy foam animals. Sound asleep.

Amy turned back to the kids. "Has he been like that long?" she asked.
Aditi nodded. "Yes, 22 hours."

Robert corrected her. "I think it's been 15 minutes. The long hand was on the twelve."

Amy looked at Sheldon again then back at her kids, and walked over to where they were on the couch. She took one of Aditi's wayward pigtails in her hand. "Did you guys have fun today?"

They nodded excitedly. Aditi answered first, whispering rather loudly. "We had a tea party and made peanut butter crackers."

"Nice," Amy said.

"And we learned about hydrogen and Dad dressed up like the Flash," Robert added.

"That sounds fun," Amy said.

But Aditi had something else to report. "Robert ate all the red jelly beans and didn't leave me any."

"Nuh uh," Robert protested loudly, "I only—"

"Shhh," Amy said. "We'll talk about it later. For now, you guys want to go wait for me in the bathroom to brush your teeth?"

Both children nodded excitedly, and took off running. Ever since she had started purchasing bubble gum-flavored toothpaste, that part of the day had gotten a lot easier. Then Amy pulled an afghan from the back of the couch and draped it over the sleeping man on the floor.

"I'll come back for you later," she said. Then she joined her children in the bathroom.
Leonard had spent yet another weekend listening to Sheldon gripe about the "woes of the housing acquisition process," so when he saw Howard at lunch, something crossed his mind.

"Howard, you bought your mom's house," he said. "Was it as painful as what Sheldon's bitching about?"

"Well when you handle everything through your Uncle Adam, a real estate attorney who also happens to be my kvater, things go a lot easier."

"What's a kvater?" Raj asked.

"It's the Jewish godfather," Howard answered. Just then, Sheldon joined them at the table.

"Actually," he said as she sat down, "a kvater is the Yiddish word for a male that takes the eight-day-old child, in this case Howard, from his mother and carries him into the room in which the circumcision is to be performed." He turned to Howard condescendingly. "A kvater is not a godfather, Howard, as that is a Catholic tradition."

Howard stared at Sheldon with supreme annoyance. Raj just shook his head.

"Don't even sweat it, dude; he does it to me all the time."

Howard turned back to Leonard. "Anyway," he said, "through the whole process, my Uncle Adam really made it a family experience: lox and bagels at the closing, well wishes for me, Bernie and the kids. He even snuck Vicodin into Ma's coffee to make sure she was too sedated to fuss. It didn't work, but it's the thought that counts."

Raj looked up from his tater tots. "Couldn't you just have inherited it?"

"I guess I could have," Howard said. "But the thing is, we needed a place, hers was available, and we all thought it was time she had a little cash and built a little place of her own."

"Dude," Raj said, "all she did was add a mother-in-law suite to the side of the house. She still lives with you."

Howard flared up. "Of course she does. Who else was going to make my pancakes in the morning?"

As Sheldon launched into a diatribe on home-loan banking practices, Leonard could feel his phone vibrating. He excused himself and then stepped out into the hallway to answer the call. It was Penny.

"I miss you," she said softly. The confession left Leonard a little moved. He couldn't recall her calling in the middle of the day like that before—wistful and melancholy. A lot of her emotions got
blamed on the hormones, but he liked to think that this moment was sincere.

"I miss you, too," he said, leaning against the wall. "The afternoon hours go by so slow. Especially with Sheldon gnawing on my ear."

He could hear her chuckle a little. "I bought some pink booties for the baby today," she said. "Pink with little white bows. Can't you just picture them on Rhiannon's little feet?"

And there went that name again. He still doesn't know when Baby X turned into Rhiannon.

That name sounded Welsh.

They weren't Welsh.

"I actually can picture, um, our baby in... those booties," Leonard stammered. "Um, but, do you still have that list of names we had from a few weeks ago?"

He could hear her mind straining on the other line. "I dunno. I think I threw it out when we decided on Rhiannon."

_Decided on Rhiannon?_, he thought.

"Why?" Penny asked.

"Just, you know," he said, "we might want a record of names we considered." And are still considering. "For a scrapbook or something."

"Oh my God," she said. "You're totally right. She might get a kick out of knowing she was almost named Selina." She started laughing.

"Hey, Catwoman kicks ass," Leonard says.

"I'm sure she does," she said, and towards the end of it, he could hear that same wistful tone in her voice. "Well, then, I'll let you go. See you in five hours."

"See you then," Leonard said and hung up.

It was July 1 and so Sheldon and Amy were seated at the dining table as the twins slept in their room. On the first evening of every January, April, July and October, the couple had their quarterly meeting. It was one of the few things that had survived the entropy of the Relationship Agreement. As their lives had become more complicated, even Sheldon had learned reluctantly that sometimes they would just have to fly by the seat of their pants. With that realization, more and more of the Agreement got cut, severely reduced or conveniently ignored. But the quarterly meeting had survived. On paper, its purpose was to outline their goals for the next three months; however, if they were being honest with themselves, most months is was the closest they ever got to a date. Tonight was no exception.

"So, it is decided: DreamWorks is inferior to both Pixar and Disney in storytelling and animation. Thus, decisions regarding this family's purchase of animated movies and their related merchandise will be handled accordingly."

"Technically, that is not a goal, Sheldon."

"Granted, but I thought it should be addressed."
Amy shrugged. "Fair enough."

"And now for the last item on our list," he said, looking down once more at the meeting's agenda, "Win the Nobel Prize."

Actually, "Win the Nobel Prize" was always the last item. There was a time that Amy would tease him about it. She would ask him how winning the Nobel Prize was a suitable goal for a list that expired in three months. If Newton could discover gravity from an apple falling on his head, Sheldon had argued, then he himself could also make a great discovery in a similar manner, maybe from a stray baseball hitting him on the arm or from a particularly strong bout with indigestion.

"You know, Sheldon," Amy teased, "it just may happen this quarter. I found a new recipe for chili that is said to be real humdinger."

Sheldon dropped his eyelids, not amused. "Hardy har har." Then he reached for his messenger bag. "On that note, if there is nothing else, this meeting is adjourned." Producing a gavel, he raised it high, ready to drop it when Amy interceded.

"Wait," she said. "There is… one more thing."

"Hm," Sheldon said with a little judgment, turning the agenda over in his hand. "It wasn't submitted in advance, but I guess I have no objections to its last minute inclusion. Although, perhaps 'meeting deadlines' should be your goal for the next quarter."

Amy ignored the jab. "After some reflection," she said, "I think we've been overlooking one way that our financial troubles might be resolved."

"By selling our organs?" he suggested. "Because, between us, we have two kidneys we can do without. I've long thought we should cash them in to pay off the MasterCard."

"Bazinga?"

"Of course," he said, and laughed to himself—the gaspy one. Amy shook her head.

"On a more serious note, I've been thinking that, well, I really think it's time I went back to work. Or really, back to my career."

Sheldon paused for the briefest moment and then looked down at the paper in his hand, fidgeting with the corners.

Amy leaned forward. "Did you say something?"

"No," Sheldon answered. "Although, it does seem a bit soon."

"Soon? It's been five years, almost to the day, that we left Olympia. 'Taking a semester off to breastfeed the twins' has turned into five years of financially uncompensated work outside of the academic arena. I'm ready to get back to coaxing high-functioning cephalopods into leading a life of addiction. Heroin addiction specifically."

She could see Sheldon's mind ticking and his mouth grinding, chewing on his words. He was holding back urges to say things that she might find upsetting. But his silence was upsetting enough.

"You object," she said finally.
He turned to her. "No."

"But you're bothered?"

He finally looked up. "Not at all. You are, without a doubt, one of the most intelligent people I've ever had the pleasure to spend time with and you have interrupted a career that brought you acclaim among your peers in the field. I can't imagine that you would be forever satisfied with mentally subsisting on the daily tedium of maintaining a household and managing the schedule of two small children, no matter how extraordinary they may be."

Amy was taken aback at the statement. She had anticipated having to fight for her cause but apparently she wouldn't have to. She leaned forward a little, crossing her arms on the table.

"Then you understand?"

"I believe I do. That would be for you to confirm, of course, but I hardly have a problem with you desiring to return to your career."

It was something in his phrasing that sounded like there was a "but" on the end of the statement.

"But what?" she prodded.

"Well, if I'm being honest—and I always am—there is one thing: I find placing the care of the twins in the hands of someone who is not genetically related to them to be a rather daunting prospect."

Amy had seen this coming and already had a response prepared. "While that is a valid concern," she said, "I think they might be ready for school."

Sheldon's face reflected pure shock at the suggestion. "School?"

"Yes, school," Amy continued. "I was talking with a mother at the pediatrician's office, and she was explaining to me the process for enrolling her children into pre-school. It's something we should consider."

Sheldon rose and grabbed a pitcher of iced tea from the kitchen island then returned to the table to top off their glasses. He spoke as he did.

"I hate to dismiss the idea outright," he said, sounding like he actually did not, "but pre-school 'education' is about one step away from a babysitter who promises to be 'educational', only to wait for the moment the parents are out of sight to plop the kids in front of the TV and subject them to a steady stream of asinine children's programming, like SpongeBob Triangle Pants, while she spends her day smoking Virginia Slims and talking on the phone with her boyfriend."

Beat.

"It's SpongBob Squarepants, and that sexist diatribe only served to inform me that you've done absolutely no research on the topic," Amy replied.

Sheldon shrugged, concession on his face, and clasped his hands in front of himself. "Fine. Enlighten me."

"Firstly, even though they are four, their birthdays are in the fall, and so they may be eligible for early enrollment in kindergarten if they test well."
"Of course they test well," Sheldon scoffed, and turned a page.

"Secondly," Amy continued, "childhood education has grown leaps and bounds since the days when a young Sheldon Cooper was put in the library alone to work on pre-algebra problems at seven years old because they didn't have anywhere else to put you. Now, Southern California, and much of the entire country, has a plethora of programs designed to target the individual needs of their students while still socializing them with their peer group."

"Socializing them with their peer group?" he repeated. "I believe that is a low priority."

"Is it?"

"Absolutely. Their 'peer group' probably consists of children who would prefer to snack on their own boogers than read a book."

"Regardless of the doubtful truth of that statement, I think that socializing the twins should be a key part of a balanced upbringing if we expect them to be—not only intelligent and educated, but—fulfilled and confident young people and adults."

Sheldon sighed. "Amy," he began aloofly, "you were the only child of an eccentric, strict mother and thus grew up in virtual isolation. I, on the other hand, am a twin and the youngest of three children that was raised in a trailer park so overrun with kids that the ice-cream truck driver had to employ a security detail to ward off the irate children that would chase his vehicle with bb guns when he ran out of frozen treats, which he invariably did."

"But how much did you associate with those children?" Amy asked.

"As little as possible."

"My point exactly."

"A point I fail to see."

"Sheldon, would you have our children become specialized targets for a rotating cast of bullies like we were as kids?"

He was horrified at this prospect. "Of course not." He seemed to have an epiphany. "Are you implying that a lack of socialization with our peer group somehow contributed to the taunting we experienced in our youth?"

"As incredible as that may seem," she said, "I suspect so."

Sheldon turned away, lost in thought. Amy reasoned further.

"In fact, when is the last time the twins have even been with children their own age?"

Sheldon rose and nonchalantly picked up a book off of the table. She was losing him. "When I was washing clothes Saturday evening, I had them with me in the laundry room. They found some young companion there to pass the time with."

Amy perked up at this news. "I wasn't aware of that. Who was the child?"

Sheldon tried to remember. "The red-headed urchin of the woman a floor down. I believe her name is Kim. A real simpleton, that woman. She's positively reckless with the way she launders her clothes."
Amy, however, was suddenly flooded with visions of a friend for her children. "How was it?"

He shrugged, thumbing through the book. "I wouldn't know. I was too aggravated by the shockingly poor performances of the 'newly-formulated' Downy to take notice of the exact nature of their play. And make no mistake, Proctor and Gamble will be hearing from me."

Amy had already made up her mind. "It's time that the twins had a real play date."

Sheldon found the declaration puzzling. "They have play dates with Penny all the time."

"But Penny is an adult."

Sheldon looked up from his book. "And it's never too late for her to learn something new, Amy."

She just sighed, and then grabbed the gavel. "Meeting adjourned?"

He nodded and down it came with a loud clank.

The next morning, Amy spotted Kim in the hall getting her mail. She rushed to her, practically accosting the woman. Kim looked up as if to ask, "How may I help you?"

Amy took a deep breath and launched into the small speech she had rehearsed.

"You may or may not remember me," Amy began, "but I think you do laundry on the same night as my partner."

Kim looked at the mailboxes and then back at Amy. It was evident she was already finding this a bit confusing. "What's her name?" she asked.

"No; she's a man. Sheldon… Sheldon Cooper."

"Yeah, him," she said less than enthusiastically. "The one who insists on using washers 1, 2 and 5. And dryer 4."

Amy had no idea, but it sounded like Sheldon.

"Yes him. Anyway, he mentioned that my twins played with your child last Saturday and had a marvelous time."

The woman looked surprised. "He did?"

"More or less."

Kim seemed doubtful, but accepted the assertion. "That's nice," she said and, locking her box, walked off while rifling through her mail. Amy followed her.

"On that thought, I was wondering if we could perhaps arrange a play date."

The woman turned around. "For our kids?"

Amy nodded. "Exactly!" she pulled out her phone. "So what days are good for you? My preference would be Monday afternoons between one and four, as Tuesday and Wednesdays are just entirely out of the question, although I imagine we might be able to squeeze in a lunch date on Wednesday if we really coordinated things, but Thursday mornings are WIDE OPEN after eight o'clock AM, although—if I'm being perfectly honest—I would prefer Friday as that's when most of the
community activities for the pre-school demographic are arranged and so we would have more educational opportunities if we were to venture outside of our homes."

The women looked a-swirl with information. "Um, I work the graveyard shift and I never wake up before two, so… it'll have to be after that. Oh, and I do bingo on Friday afternoons, so that's out."

Amy sighed and glanced at her calendar, again. "Well, let's just try this coming Monday then," she said, "which is in three days." She held out her hand. The woman took it, awkwardly. "Aww, what the heck?" Amy said and hugged her. The gesture served to unnerve Kim a bit.

"Your place or mine?" she said while regaining her composure. Amy wanted to say her own, but remembered the objective of this little soiree.

"Yours."

"Um, cool," Kim said. "See… see you then." She walked off.

Amy leapt on the inside. As she headed back towards the stairs, she looked into her reflection in the double doors with a cocky nod. "You're a rock star, Amy Farrah Fowler."

Just then, someone walked through the doors.

"Pardon me. Where you saying something?" the woman asked.

Amy took a nervous glance around. "Nope," she said, and went up the stairs.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

So, the Superman insignia in the walk has to mean something.

When Sheldon got home from work, Amy had fantastic news.
"Play date, Monday afternoon at one o'clock sharp," she blurted out.

Sheldon was less than enthusiastic. He placed his satchel on the couch. "I'm willing to entertain this little 'socialization' experiment as long as no IQs get hurt in the process."

"We don't even know what the twin's IQs are," Amy pointed out.

"Even more reason to treat them with kid gloves."

Amy shook her head and went to the kitchen. "Penny and Leonard agreed to keep the twins this Saturday while we house-hunt."

"Oh goody," Sheldon said, his tone decidedly lackluster.

Amy stared into the open cabinets. She wondered what she could make with beans and rice. After few seconds of deliberation, she went with the obvious.

Beans and rice it was.

Penny and Leonard were in bed, and had been for the better part of 45 minutes, but were so hopelessly distracted by the night's featured presentation that they still hadn't gotten around to actually falling asleep.

"You know, sequels get a bad name," Leonard finally said, "but this is right up there with all the greats, like, Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, Batman's The Dark Knight, Star War's The Empire Strikes Back… Toy Story II."

Penny was listening but was still finding it hard to follow. "I'm sorry, Leonard, I just don't see how us looking at sonogram pictures of our daughter is the same as watching a movie about a Mr. Potato Head that talks when nobody's looking."

Leonard looked at her with one eye squinted. "Because these new sonograms are prettier than the previous ones?"

Penny looked at him then back at the sonograms that she was holding out an arm's length. She almost commented on how nerdy that sounded, but then realized that she kind of agreed. "They are aren't they?" she sighed. "All the little toes and fingers make me melt." Overcome, she held the picture to her chest, then laid her head next to Leonard's and snuggled in closer. "I can't believe we're doing this Leonard. I can't believe we're going to be parents."

Leonard nodded. "I'm going to be one proud papa."
Penny turned to him. "Papa?"

"Yeah, papa."

"Like P-A-P-A?"

"That's how you spell papa."

"What's wrong with 'dad'?"

"'Dad' seems so generic." He started to repeat the word in a monotone voice. "Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad."

"Right. Dad," Penny said, unsure of what he was getting at.

"I would like her to call me something a little less common. Something that will distinguish me from all the other fathers at the sandbox."

"The fact that you'll be wearing a Green Arrow T-shirt will be all the distinction you need."

"I'm serious, Penny."

"I am, too. 'Papa' makes it sound like Rhiannon's father is a 500-year-old Smurf."

The quip stung Leonard more than Penny thought it would.

"Well, well," he said, his voice rising, "The name 'Rhiannon' makes the baby sound like the mother to the Demetian hero Pryderi and wife to Pwyll."

Penny didn't have a clue who any of those people were, but she didn't miss the tone of Leonard's voice.

"What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem is you just unilaterally decided on Rhiannon without my input."

"You were totally on board with Rhiannon. Don't try to back out now."

"When was I 'totally on board' with Rhiannon?"

"You said, and I quote, 'It's a very pretty name.'"

"I might have said it was pretty, but so is Emily Rose. That doesn't mean I want our child named after a movie about an exorcism."

"You're impossible," Penny yelled.

"I'm not impossible," he yelled back. "I just don't want to be shut out."

"Four out of the five names you suggested were comic book characters. That's how you got shut out."

"Diana and Jennifer are totally normal names."

"I'm going to sleep," Penny said, and turned to her side, snatching the cover over her.

Leonard shook his head then turned over, too. After a few minutes, he turned back around and
spoke.

"And I guess you aren't interested in some make-up s—"

"NO!" she yelled.

"Just checking," he said, and turned back over.

The weekend came soon enough, and Sheldon and Amy embarked on yet another day spent in search of a home. As their prospects faded, so did their standards. So far, their short list included a cozy bungalow with handsome interiors that sat across from a teeth-rattling railroad track and a beautiful cedar house with a Spanish tile roof, but that had the distinction of having had eight previous owners—all of whom had died… in the house.

To put it mildly, Amy was growing tired.

"Sheldon, we must be doing something wrong," she groaned. "It honestly shouldn't be this hard to find a house that is both aesthetically pleasing, situated in a good neighborhood, small enough to manage with reasonable effort, large enough to house a family of four comfortably, in a district with exceptional schools, within our price range and suitable for indulging hobbies, interests and research ranging from the inane to the monumental." After gulping for air, she wondered if maybe they had too many criteria. Sheldon didn't seem to think so.

"I agree. It should be easier, Amy," Sheldon said despondently, "but the world is madness. Frankly, I'm thinking of joining Howard in one of his little space projects and taking up residence on the moon."

But Amy was not yet defeated. "Maybe we should take a few hours to reassess our priorities and seek out resources that could help us in this endeavor. Perhaps a housing broker."

"Or," Sheldon began, his interest in house-hunting all but dead, "we can chock this whole thing up to an amusing but ultimately unfruitful experience and then use the remaining time to visit the hobby shop nearby that has a reputation for selling discontinued model-train cabooses in sterling condition." He raised his eyebrows and nodded his head at her with rising eagerness. "Tempting, right?" Amy looked at him with mute weariness, dampening his enthusiasm. He shrugged his shoulders. "Honesty, Amy, I can't think of better way to spend the afternoon."

"Sheldon, the decision to buy a house requires focus, commitment and—most of all—patience, and Penny and Leonard are only going to keep the kids for so long before we have to go back. We really have to make the most of this time." She turned back to the modest home before them, and was suddenly filled with renewed vigor and promise. Her voice reflected her brightening mood. "We, Sheldon, are not the faint of heart. We are made of sterner stuff. If we're going to find success in the task set before us, we must turn over every stone, exhaust every resource, and travel every gravel-paved driveway. There's no telling which one of these modest abodes might just turn out to be the house in which we raise our family, reach our dreams and live out our days." She turned to him. "Sheldon, your focus determines your reality."

Always a sucker for a verbose soliloquy that ends in a Star Wars quote (even if it was from Qui-Gon Jinn) Sheldon plugged himself back into the mission. Mostly.

"Fine," he said. "But after touring, assessing and dismissing this house—as we most likely will—I think we should reward our tireless, though disappointing, efforts at house-hunting with a relaxing hour in the hobby shop."
"No," Amy said, and got out of the car.

"I'll let her think it over," he muttered, and got out as well.

They started up the walk and something caught Sheldon's eye. She pointed down to one of the tiles.

"There's a Superman insignia in the walkway. This house might hold promise after all."

"See; I said we should be optimistic."

"Hello," came the voice of a jolly woman standing just inside the open door. "Welcome. I'm Natalie." She shook both of their hands. "You arrived at a good time; no one else is here at the moment. Come on in and I'll give you a tour of the place," she said, and ushered them inside. "I don't know what you already know, but I'll start from the top. This home was built in 2007, and boasts a square footage of—"

"If I may interrupt," Sheldon said as his eyes swept the foyer, "will you be providing any refreshments?"

"Wow, um, I'm sorry, I don't think so."

He was displeased. "The last Open House we attended provided Oreo cookies and milk."

"I can offer you some tap water and ice?"

"No thank you," he said, and commenced to scribbling in a pad.

Somewhat rattled, she continued her tour. They walked the house and she narrated the surroundings, giving them a rundown of the place. The appliances were all included, the carpet was three years old, the windows were energy efficient. Oh, and the house was originally owned by a writer for *Lois and Clark: the Real Adventures of Superman.*

"You would think a writer would live in a more luxurious space," Amy said.

"Writers make less than most people think," Natalie said. "I've sold homes for writers from shows as diverse as *Roseanne* to *Two and Half Men.*"

"Besides," Sheldon replied, "*Lois and Clark* was the low point of the Superman franchise. A veritable soap opera in tights."

"I don't know," Natalie said. "I rather enjoyed it." She reached out her hand. "Shall we head to the back of the house?"

Sheldon leaned in again as he followed. "Bad sign, Amy."

Amy and Sheldon toured the house with all the zeal of a fish being offered a glass of water. Until they reached the sunroom. And suddenly, something clicked for Amy. It was by far the most charming thing she'd seen all day.

"Isn't this adorable?" she whispered to Sheldon.

"If the word adorable has been redefined as 'a perfect environment for eye strain overheating,' yes, it's the most adorable thing I've ever seen."

Amy rolled her eyes and moved on to the bedrooms. And that's where her enchantment ended. The
third bedroom was about the size of a walk-in closet.

She leaned in to Sheldon once more. "That bedroom would be better suited for a Chihuahua."

"Agreed," Sheldon said. "I've seen enough, Amy. Let's leave."

"Well, let her finish her presentation first," Amy suggested.

Dutifully they continued the tour when they took a second walk down the hallway. Sheldon saw a recess in the wall that he'd missed before.

"Is that a sword display?" he asked.

"Ah, well, yes and no; it's a trophy nook. The previous owner's wife was a champion bowler. She kept her 2007 National Bowling Championships trophy there, as well as some assorted ribbons. The rest of her trophies were displayed in the third, ahem, bedroom."

Sheldon continued staring at the "trophy nook" with mounting fascination. "It really would make an excellent home for my sword collection. By golly, we'll take the house."

Natalie's face brightened. "Excellent!"

Amy's face darkened. She pulled on Sheldon's elbow.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked, and marched off to the living room. Sheldon literally drug his feet as he followed. "Sheldon," she said, "we are not going to take the house because it has a space in the wall."

"Amy, we can't miss this opportunity. We are not likely to find another with this particular feature."

"So what?" she said, exasperated. "A sword display is not on our priority list."

"Neither is a sunroom."

"Which I was more than happy to give up once I realized that a trophy closet was being touted as a third bedroom. Sheldon, we have to have two reasonably-sized bedrooms for the twins."

Sheldon mentally groped for an excuse, and jumped up when he thought of one. "Aditi can sleep with us," he said. "That's all she wants anyway."

"Forever?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Sheldon be serious," she demanded.

"I wouldn't be otherwise. They can take turns between the larger bedroom and the master with us. There, problem solved."

Amy turned on her heels and marched back to Natalie.

"We won't be taking the house, though we thank you for your time."

Natalie sighed with a nod. "Here's my card if you change your mind."
Amy shook the woman's hand and then marched off towards the car. Sheldon slowly followed, looking forlornly back at the house.

Amy crashed into the driver's seat and pulled the door harder than usual. A second later, Sheldon got into the passenger seat. That sat silently for several moments.

"I believe we will come to regret that decision," he said with an air, brushing the dust off his sleeve.

Amy turned to him, dejected and sullen and a bit too calm.

Then she started crying.

"See, you're regretting it already," Sheldon said.

"WE'RE NEVER GOING TO FIND A HOUSE!" she wailed. Her true distress awakened some sympathy in Sheldon.

"Sure we will," he said, attempting to be chipper.

"Really?" she said, and her tone turned angry. "We've visited over 50 houses, and we haven't found *any* that work. Then, to add insult to injury, you complain constantly, deviate from our priorities list whenever it's convenient and, honestly, I don't know if all that 'research' you do online is actually helping or just a way of finding more reasons to prolong our time in the apartment."

Sheldon seemed chastened by her tears, and her accusations. He turned his face down with some remorse. Then, he put a hand on her shoulder. "I want you to be happy, Amy."

"Do you?" she said with some doubt, crying anew.

He nodded. "If you want a sunroom, we can find a house with a sunroom."

She wiped her tears on the back of her sleeve. "It's not about the sunroom, Sheldon, it's about…"

She stopped. Would he ever understand?

"It's about what?" he asked.

"It's about a dream I have. A dream for us and our family."

Sheldon face was contorted and he was trying to extrapolate something concrete from that, but was clearly having difficulty.

"I mean. I have a dream about the life I want for us, and the house that will let us have that life."

"Okay," he said, clearly still not following.

"Sheldon, there is…" Amy paused, bracing herself for what she was about to reveal. "Another house."

He was confused. "Another house?"

She nodded. "A house I haven't shown you."

"Well… where is it?"

Amy smiled a little just thinking about it, and stared off into the distance. "It's behind a smattering
of trees coyly beckoning us to come inside."

"Well, I don't know if we can plug that into the GPS," he said.

"I already know where it is," she said. "Would you like to go and see it?"

He shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Now smiling brightly, she put the key in the ignition and pulled off.

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Amy and Sheldon stood at the base of the home's footpath, staring towards a home bathed in the glow of an orange sunset. It looked, in a word, radiant.

"This is quite a place," Sheldon said. He seemed to be a little stupefied by what he had just seen. Amy sighed wistfully.

"Did you see the stonewall interiors?"

He nodded.

"And the sleek appliances in the kitchen?"

He nodded.

"And the custom-built, wrap-around patio out back?"

"I did," he answered.

"And that big, spacious, inviting yard?"

He turned to her. "It was lovely."

She took a step forward, framing the home with her hands. "Looking through the windows doesn't even begin to do the house justice. You still didn't get a good look at the bedrooms or bathrooms. And the fireplace was blocked from the angle from which we peered in."

"Even so," Sheldon said, "your detailed description created a vivid image."

Amy smiled, then turned and started towards the car. "So now that you've seen it, I think you can understand what I was saying earlier about my dream and what I want for our family. It'll give you a better idea of what I'm looking for when we start searching again."

"Hold on," Sheldon said, taking a halting step behind her. "I thought you wanted this house."

"I do," she said. "But, we can't afford this house. It's too expensive for us."

"Wait," Sheldon said, taking another glance at the house and then back at Amy. "Are you sure? I mean, if this is your dream house, Amy I want you to have it. There must be some way."

Amy shook her head. "I don't think so, Sheldon. We've been over those numbers a million times and our current budget already pushes the bounds of what we are financially capable of."

But Sheldon was finding it hard to relent so easily. Amy noted his agitation, and walked up closer to him.

"I sense that you want me to have this house. And I am deeply touched by that, but... I also know
that we have to be practical, and we can’t always get what we want.” She tugged at his fingers. "Honestly, I feel better just showing it to you. It was like… a little private dream moment that just the two of us shared."

It took a while for Sheldon to respond. "I guess you're right."

She noted the sadness in his voice. "How about we go to the model train store on the way home? We need a break."

"Alright," he said, and they walked back to the car. As they drove off, he watched the house in the rear-view mirror until it was out of sight.

Monday afternoon at one o'clock, Amy knocked on Kim's door. There was no response, so she knocked again. She knocked yet another time and another, and with each rap on the door she wilted a little more. It seemed Kim had forgotten about their appointment after all. Despairing, she looked down at her two children who were on either side of her, each one grasping one of her hands and looking up at her with bright, hopeful eyes. Hoping against hope, she knocked one final time.

And waited.
Amy waited outside of the apartment of her neighbor Kim, willing the woman to open the door but secretly thinking of an alternate plan if she didn't. Just when she remembered that there was only one more blank spot left on her Fun House Rec Room punch card before she got a free pizza, the door swung open.

Kim looked a little blurry-eyed and groggy.

"Did you forget?" Amy asked.

"Nope, I just took a nap. I worked a long shift last night. I figured your knock would wake me up." She rubbed one eye. "It did." She squinted at a gigantic tote bag dangling from Amy's shoulder. "What's that?"

"Ah, this," Amy said, tapping the bag. "I was unsure of your household's protocol for emergencies, so I brought a first aid kit, a few safety devices the portable defibrillator that Sheldon and I purchased in case the unthinkable were to occur. Activity-wise, I brought an assortment of age-appropriate puzzles, coloring books, flash cards, blocks and even figurines from contemporary children's movies, in case the young ones desired to engage in more modern play."

Just then a toddler waddled out. Amy found his presence surprising.

"I wasn't aware you had two children," Amy said with some regret. "I'm afraid I didn't bring anything for a child of that age-group."

"Trust me, they have enough toys," Kim said. She wandered back inside, tacitly inviting Amy and the twins in. Upon entering, Amy found that the apartment was generally clean, but a bit bare for her liking and not stimulating at all for developing minds. The TV was on and tuned to a daytime talk show, but neither child seemed to be watching it and, instead, were wrestling (and arguably abusing) a little pug dog. He seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Before we get started with this much ballyhooed 'playdate,'" Amy said. "Where is your restroom located?"

"Same spot as yours. I think we have the same floor plan."

Amy nodded. "Silly me; indeed we do."

"You guys want something to drink?" Kim asked, while walking over to the kitchen and pulling down some glasses. "We have orange soda, milk and coffee." As Amy considered her options (only one of which was suitable for children) the little boy ran over to the twins.
"Wanna play?" he asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Amy said, dropping her bag and pulling out an assortment of items. "I've brought with me some things I think you'll love!"

"Come on, Amy," Kim said with a wave of her hand, and handed Amy a glass of ice and a can of soda. "Trust me; you do not have to teach those two how to play." She sat on the couch and patted the seat next to her, and Amy reluctantly joined her. Kim, suddenly excited, placed a hand on Amy's lap. "So, anyway. Please, please, please tell me you watch Weight Wars!" she yelled.

Amy shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Oh my God! Last night was the BEST EPISODE EVER!"

Amy glanced down at Kim's kids, who were both beating the carpet with two plastic bats. She resolved herself to relax. This was about socializing them, right? She took a deep breath and turned back to Kim.

"So, Weight Wars, you say?"

Sheldon had gone to work that morning preoccupied with the implications of the interferometric nature of neutral mesons, but as the day wore on, he couldn't help but think back to the events transpiring on the home front. By the time his workday had ended, he was actually was dying to know how everything had gone. When he came through the door, Amy looked up from a pile of paperwork on the dining table. She was probably working on gathering housing information, sorting bills, researching schooling requirements, or perhaps a frightening mix of all three.

"So, how was the play date?" he asked, dropping his keys into the bowl.

"In a word: a disaster," she answered and returned her attention to shuffling through papers.

He just barely repressed the glee he invariably felt when he was right about something. "Amy," he said, "I have never claimed to be clairvoyant and I have no tolerance for people who claim to be able to divine the future using paranormal methods, but… I had a hunch about this one."

Amy turned back to him. "Sheldon, you didn't have a 'hunch.' You wanted it to fail." She stopped working and then stood, walking over the couch and plopping down sadly. "I guess you got your wish."

"I wouldn't say I wanted it to fail," he said. He went to get a drink from the kitchen. "Even so, I may entertain a certain curiosity about how, exactly, the events transpired. Tea?"

She shook her head.

"Having never visited Kim's home before," Amy explained, "I was wholly unaware of what program of play she had already implemented in her home. So, I came prepared for every scenario I was likely to confront. I brought first aid kits, a few safety devices—like plastic outlet covers—and our portable defibrillator in the case of an unthinkable emergency. Activity-wise, I brought an assortment of age-appropriate puzzles, coloring books, flash cards, blocks and even figurines from the Pixar, Disney and PBS Kids catalog. After consulting with Kim about the location of the bathroom, the condition of the fire detector and the location of all emergency exits, I allowed the children to commence with play while Kim and I sat on the couch in the corner."

Sheldon liked what he heard.
"Amy, I find your management of the play date to be exceptional. For the life of me I can't imagine what could have possibly been disastrous about it. If absolutely nothing else occurred, the event you've just described was an undeniable success."

"Well, then it was a success, because absolutely nothing else happened."

Sheldon furrowed his brow. "I'm sorry. I'm not following."

"As I sat trapped on the couch, subjected to mindless babbling about Kim's favorite reality show—a program that has anorexics and the severely obese battling in weekly weight challenges—I frequently glanced over at my twins and Kim's two children: six-year-old Michael and two-year-old Tara. Instead of watching four children getting lost in a world of make-believe and parentally-guided play, I watched on as Aditi and Robert stood, pressed against the wall silently while the other two shrieked, laughed and abused a pug named Ralph with shameless abandon."

"The twins silence was likely a result of the foreign surroundings and the inferior vocabulary of the other children. Trust me. There is no greater challenge than being forced to collaborate with your inferiors. I typically have to be forced to do so, often under the threat of bodily harm or job loss. I hope you didn't threaten them."

"I would never threaten them, Sheldon. I just gently encouraged them. However, after my repeated tries at verbally coaxing them to play failed, I finally joined them on the floor, only for them to remain timid and aloof. Kim's ingenious contribution to the situation was," she imitated Kim's tone, "'You can't play for them, Amy,' which was a comment I resented. Moments later, Aditi tugged on my shirt and whispered, 'Mommy I want to go home.' Defeated, that's just what we did."

"And that's how it's done," Sheldon said, with a celebratory gesture.

Amy turned to him, discouragement on her face. "That is not how it's done, Sheldon. Your daughter is incapable of one of the most basic of human activities… socialization. While that makes you proud, my heart aches at the thought of her in college, still sharing a room with her brother in the co-ed dorms, spending her Friday nights playing Scrabble alone and pretending her V8 is a Bloody Mary while she listens to the raucous merrymaking of her fellow classmates just a block away at the Student Union, her only comfort being the prospect of a new episode of Monk, who she secretly imagines is her boyfriend." She snorted. "Defective detective, my ass."

"You think Aditi will be watching Monk in college?" Sheldon said, confused. "That program went off the air years ago."

"Of course," Amy said, clearing her throat with a bit of embarrassment. "Then likely some other program, then." The visualization had revealed more about herself than she intended.

Tea in hand, Sheldon took his spot on the couch. "Maybe she'll have grown up to be a Doctor Who aficionado," he said, staring dreamily off into space. "We should have met Thirteen at least, maybe even Fourteen, by then." He shuddered excitedly at the thought of it. "Long live the Doctor. Or at least may the TV gods make the heads of British programming keep time-defying period pieces on the air forever and stop sending us bawdy reality TV show ideas."

Amy herself had prayed that same pagan prayer about Downton Abbey, only to weep as she watched the credits roll on the series finale of that beloved program.

Maybe she should start watching Weight Wars after all.

As happened each night, time rolled on steadily towards 11:00, and with its arrival came the time to
sleep. From the bed, Amy watched on while Sheldon changed into his pajamas. At some point, she went from watching to just staring, and her mind drifted back to Kim's apartment. The day's incident had rattled her more than she had anticipated. She was beginning to wonder if she should even go back to work. How could she? The twins were wholly ill-prepared for life in the outside world. Perhaps she'd been too hasty in assuming they were ready. Perhaps Sheldon was right. Maybe it was too early to turn them over to someone else's hands.

"Amy?"

She turned towards Sheldon at the sound of her name. He was sitting on his side of the bed.

"Yes?"

"I said, 'Why do we put suits in garment bags and put garments in suitcases'?"

Amy didn't have an answer. "I don't know. Why?"

"I don't know either. But, you have to admit it's a rather fascinating bit of inconsistency in our language."

The words barely registered in Amy's brain. She laid her head back against the headboard, and Sheldon noticed.

"You're upset," he said, or maybe asked.

She nodded. "A little."

"Because of the playdate was disappointing."

She turned to him. The playdate had been disappointing. But really, the playdate had only been that: disappointing. And hearing that said out loud made it sound less scary and overwhelming. Hearing it from Sheldon made her suddenly not want anything else in the world but for his arms around her.

"Yeah," she said and drew closer. "It was disappointing."

"Understandable," he said. He fully got into bed and turned out his lamp.

"Sheldon," she called, before he lied down.

"Yes?"

"Can you hold me?"

He didn't say anything, but scooted closer and wrapped his arms around her. In his embrace, she could feel her stress peel away from her. She could feel herself calming down.

She felt something else too.

She snuggled her head under his neck, then turned her face up, feeling his warm skin against her lips and nose. A sudden flush rushed through her body, and she could feel it in her cheeks, nose, ears and the tips of her fingers. She pushed her lips out, and his late-night stubble brushed against her face. She brought her hand up and rested it on his neck. He suddenly spoke.

"Feel any better?" he asked.
"Yes," she whispered.

"Good," he said. Then he abruptly let go, turned over and pulled up the covers.

"Sheldon?" she said, irritation in her voice. He noted her tone.

"Pardon my manners," he said. "Goodnight, Amy."

Amy just sighed, turned over and went to sleep.

It's weird. Even if Amy had sex a million times (or considerably less than that) some moments stood out from the others. Like the first time Sheldon really made love to her.

It was the night of Leonard and Penny's wedding. A glorious event by any standard, it was held at a local church that Penny had fallen in love with while filming a jilted-at-the-altar scene on the soap *The Love of a Thousand Summer Nights*. She hadn't even been playing the bride (just one of the bridesmaids) but bad omens be damned, they decided to have their wedding there anyway.

In the weeks preceding the ceremony, Sheldon had more than once soliloquized on his rather unromantic views on marriage. Formal matrimony, he argued, no more bound two people to a relationship than putting a lock on the front door and (considering the high cost of the modern wedding) he said that the entire process was a trite anachronism at best and an expensive spectacle of doom at its worst. Officially, that was Amy's stance as well, mostly because it was a stance she could afford to have. She and Sheldon were as permanent as any pair she'd seen, and she was confident they'd always be together. That, coupled with the fact that they already had a growing family, meant she had more stability and love in her home than many married couples could ever dream of. Even so, as she sat crossed-legged on Penny's bed tying ribbons on party favors, she sometimes thought that there were worse things than making a fancy declaration of love in front of friends and family.

On the day of the nuptials, the small church was filled to the brim with academics, family, and friends, as well as a host of waitresses, valets and coffee baristas who all aspired to be movie stars someday. As they waited outside, Amy had watched, giddily, as each member of the bridal party had disappeared behind the church doors. When her turn came, she'd gripped Penny's hand and, with a bob of the head, said "Go get 'em kid," before walking out ahead of the bride. She'd done this before (been someone's maid-of-honor), but this time Sheldon—standing tall and handsome—was at the bottom of the aisle, and walking towards the alter felt grander somehow. Leonard himself had looked like nothing short of the happiest man in the world as, moments later, he watched his bride come to him, escorted by her proud father, Wyatt. And what a bride she was: decked out in an elegant designer dress (regal in its simplicity), with a proper veil and a train a mile long, Penny radiated a beauty that seemed to light up the whole room, if not the entire world beyond those four walls. Amy had beamed to just be standing beside her best friend as she vowed to take her beloved Leonard as her lawfully-wedded husband. As the newly-appointed Dr. and Mrs. Hofstadter leaned into their first kiss, Amy and Sheldon caught each other's eyes and there was a flicker of something magical between them. The moment was followed by a swell of music from the stringed quartet that signaled the crowd to rise to their feet, and Amy was covered in goose bumps as—arm in arm with the love of her own life—she and Sheldon followed the bride and groom out of the chapel. She stole a glance up towards Sheldon and discovered that the wide smile on her face was complemented by the demure grin he was wearing in spite of himself as they entered the limo that was waiting for them outside.

The splendor continued into the reception held at a nearby hotel, a gilded affair replete with good food, live music, laughter, and love. Amy couldn't help but be swept up in the festivity of the night.
and floated around the room, meeting gossipy great-aunts and snotty-nosed nephews alike. When it was time for the toast, she looked around to find Sheldon, racked with nerves and tucked in the corner, almost in a prayerful stance. She strolled over and slipped her hand in his. The silent gesture infused him with renewed confidence and he opened his eyes before making his way to the front of the crowd and reciting his rehearsed speech (slash roast) on his and Leonard's relationship over the years, followed by his well wishes for their matrimony. He would later get mixed reviews on his opening joke (on the Fundamental Forces of Nature) and an anecdote about Leonard getting sick, but Amy found him as humorous and charming as always and was proud that he was hers.

Sometime after the cutting of the cake, the dancing really picked up, and Amy pleaded for Sheldon to dance with her. After turning her down several times, the DJ played a rousing waltz that managed to lure Sheldon out onto the dance floor. As he spun her around, Amy realized it was the most fun she’d had in a long time. When the song was over, it immediately faded into a slow dance, an old Elvis song that her mother would play when she was little, and Sheldon paused a moment, silently debating whether or not to head back to the table. Without saying a word, Amy took his hand and placed it on the small of her back, then she drew in close to his body, tenderly pressing her head against his chest. He took her petite hand in his, and they slowly swayed back in forth in time to the King’s sultry voice reminding them of how some loves were as inevitable as the river flowing down into the sea. Those words had never felt truer, and in Sheldon's arms, Amy felt safe and cared for. The feeling overwhelmed her and she stopped moving; so did Sheldon. He looked down at her with a question, but she couldn’t explain and maybe she didn't need to.

"Let's go," he whispered, and she nodded in agreement.

After confirming that Mary would watch the twins for the night, Sheldon and Amy cut out early and they made their way to the front desk. Keys in hand, they scurried up the stairs to the second floor. Sheldon’s hand was trembling as he swiped the card to their room and they fell through the door, not wasting a moment as they fell into each other. The scene started out familiar; they just kind of started making out, but Sheldon was growing more harried, more impatient. He picked her up and placed her on the bed, while he stood, crouching over her, from just beyond the foot of the bed. He leaned on one hand while pulling off his bow tie with the other. Amy cursed the tight-fitting dress, the intricate fastenings and the binding corset that she was wearing and was torn between freeing herself and freeing Sheldon—all the while distracted by his lips, by his mouth, by his… tongue. They started kissing more urgently—more single-mindedly—and he paused for the briefest moment only to pull off his T-shirt before he descended to her body again.

It was a Sheldon she didn't know—wasn't even sure existed—before that moment.

"Sheldon?" she asked, because it was a question.

He shook his head, trying to pull an answer from the haze of his mind. "I love you, Amy," he panted.

Hearing those words never got old, and Amy checked herself for over-thinking things… for wondering. What more reason was needed? She never doubted his love and, God knows, she wanted nothing more than for Sheldon to take her. She relaxed and succumbed to the moment.

Sometimes she still thought back to the way he had peppered her jaw with careless kisses, panted weakly into her ear, and pressed his needy fingers into her hips until it hurt. She could remember lying back, open-eyed and breathless, as he hovered over her, his eyes heavy with desire, his body—hot, moist and firm—moving rhythmically back and forth…

It had been the most amazing sex of her life.
They had stayed in bed after that, spent and awake—not even leaving to shower—tangled up in the sheets and not talking, for words were too heavy, too inadequate and wholly unnecessary. He was lying on his side, while she was on her back, and she cherished having his arm splayed across her body and his warm face against her shoulder. She was turned towards the ceiling and her eyes were shut, but even though she wasn't looking at him, she could feel him there beside her. It was a simple thing, but she never stopped being amazed at how wonderful that felt.

"Amy?" he whispered, as he always did, and with her eyes still closed, she turned her head towards him, taking special pleasure in the sound of his voice. She didn't see it, but his somber face was just barely lit by the first faint rays of daylight trickling in through the window in the wee hours of the morning. "Have you ever thought about getting married?"

"To you?" she asked.

He pushed himself up a little, leaning on his elbow. "Of course."

She waited a second, considering her answer. "I… have." Silence. "What made you ask?"

"Because," he said. Then he dropped back down, turning over onto his back. Their shoulders were up against each other, and his elbow fell lazily over hers. "Because, I never thought much of the practice, but… customs become customs for a reason, I think."

She finally opened her eyes and was a little startled to find he was staring at her, his blues eyes piercing and bright and hypnotic. She almost felt she could fall into them. Absently, she traced her finger along his shoulder.

"Maybe it's something we should talk about," she said. "If you would be amenable to that."

He nodded. "I would be. Amenable. To talking about it."

She nodded, too. And for the first time, maybe in her whole life, Amy actually thought she might be getting… married. She smiled in spite of herself. It triggered a smile in him too.

He did have a beautiful smile.

"I love you, Sheldon," she said.

He didn't say anything but tucked one arm under her head, wrapped the other around her body and pulled her into a firm embrace. She clung to his arms fiercely, and thought to herself that she may never let go.

It was the perfect night. At this moment, however, it seemed like a million miles away.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Heavenly Day – Patty Griffin
Sheldon begged his mother to stay another day after the wedding.

Despite their (well, Sheldon's) pleas that Mary stay a little longer after the wedding, she went home the next day. She hated to miss Sunday services, she'd said, but she had to be back in time for her doctor's appointment on Monday morning; a routine mammogram, it was—nothing to be worried about. Except that... studies show that forty-one percent of Americans will get cancer in their lifetimes, and the Cooper family was nothing if not red-blooded Americans. So when Missy called Sheldon the following night with tears in her voice and talk of a lump, worry was all that Sheldon did. Amy assured him that until they got back the biopsy results, there was still room to hope for the best. Having previously learned in the most vivid of ways that a fatalistic explosion need not accompany every notice of bad news, he tried to squash his pessimism, but he was far from optimistic. Willing himself to follow Amy's urgings, he took a deep breath, grit his teeth and went about living his life... but he turned and tossed at night.

And then more bad news came. The tissue sample was malignant; it wasn't too advanced, they'd said, but it was an aggressive cancer and some suspicious cells had been found in her lymph nodes. There would be one surgery, and then another, and then a round of chemotherapy. In phone calls, Mary's unwavering faith meant she faced her misfortune with a determined cheer, but even she couldn't hide the fear in her voice. Sheldon, however, was in an altered state and he walked around in a persistent gloom, unwilling (unable?) to put on the brave face that Mary insisted on. He tried to be more cheerful around the twins, but Amy discerned that (even in their childish innocence) they knew that their dad needed his space. They gave it to him. Leonard would stop over sometimes and she'd hear him in the living room, talking Sheldon back from the ledge. But Amy knew that Sheldon was not easy to console.

Whenever Sheldon talked about going back home, Mary insisted that Missy, her oncologist and the Lord were all taking good care of her. She encouraged him to stay put; he had obligations to attend to, she reasoned, and there was nothing he could do. But when she had to be hospitalized for an infection as a result of a weakened immune system, Sheldon suddenly found being in Pasadena unbearable; he insisted that they make a trip out to Galveston.

Amy was reluctant to accompany him at first; the cost of last minute tickets, not to mention flying with two eighteen-month-olds in tow, meant the trip would be a hard one—financially and otherwise. Besides, other than Mary, Amy found his family to be a collection of loud brutes whose passions consisted of an exhaustive list of everything that Amy found tedious, baffling and intimidating—and often, all three. Even Missy and Amy had come to a cool truce, agreeing to disagree on just about everything and mostly nodding and smiling when in each other's company. (Amy was baffled as to how that woman got along so well with Penny.) Missy did adore the twins, however, and that was enough to maintain some semblance of a relationship between them. It had crossed Amy's mind to ask if she could stay behind, but when he looked up from searching for flights online and said, "I'm scared, Amy," she knew how much he needed her, and all her other concerns became moot. On the plane ride over, he avoided the word games and magazine articles that usually held his attention, and stared out the window as a fretful Aditi writhed on his lap. Amy leaned her head against her sleeping son, trying to rest up a bit herself, when Sheldon had reached
over and grabbed her hand tightly. It was as if he was trying to tap into Amy's strength and use it for his own, and she hoped that maybe he could.

When they got to the hospital, Missy met them outside the oncology ward with hugs. She seemed a little worse for wear, but was nevertheless merry and warm. She assured Sheldon that "Mama will be fine" and encouraged him to go back and see her. Missy's demeanor heartened Amy's spirits some and, after Missy and one of Sheldon's aunts each took a child, the couple made their way back to Mary's hospital room. Amy put her hand on Sheldon's back as he opened the door.

They found Mary in bed with her eyes closed. She looked very different from the woman they'd last seen that June, all dolled up in her Sunday best for the wedding. Since then, her skin had become pale and gaunt, her eyes sunken in, she was tied up to machines and... she didn't have any hair.

"Mom," he said, almost asked, as if to check if it was really she. At the sound of his voice she woke up.

"Shelly," she said, smiling. "I thought you'd never come." The statement betrayed her desire to see him after all.

"Hey, Shelly," came a voice in the corner; it was his brother.

"Hello, Junior," Sheldon sighed, maybe a little startled, and turned his attention back to his mom.

"I got your bear," she said and turned towards where it sat in the corner.

"It isn't a bear," Sheldon corrected. "It's a koala."

"It's the same thing, dear."

"They aren't the same, actually," Sheldon insisted. "Koalas are tree-dwelling marsupials found exclusively in Australia. Bears are... bears."

"Fine then, sweetie. I got your koala. So how's Amy?" she asked.

"She's here," he said, turning to where Amy stood by the door.

Mary turned and saw her pressed against the wall. "Get over here, sweetie."

Amy advanced further, joining Sheldon by the bed. "Hello, Mary. How are you feeling?"

"Well," she said, searching for an answer, "I've seen better days, but I've also seen worse."

"Even so, I must say," Amy said, "that for a woman with no hair, you look absolutely stunning."

"Now, Amy," Mary said, "you should know by now that flattery holds absolutely no sway over me."

"I am not flattering you," Amy replied. "Many women and men alike have had short haircuts or even the occasional case of hair loss only to discover that they suffer from misshapen heads that are riddled with craters, lumps and unsightly marks. Once, when I was in the eighth grade, an angry pack of young women in our school—known as the softball team—cornered me in the girl's locker room and rendered me completely bald. It was only then that I learned that there was a dark patch of hyper-pigmentation on the back of my head, unfortunately shaped like a slice of Swiss cheese. Swiss Miss was among the milder monikers the incident earned me. I won't share the more
offensive ones, as we are in mixed company."

"I thank for you not doing so," Mary said.

"You're welcome."

"And how are my babies?" Mary asked.

"They are fine," Amy nodded. "They are with your daughter and sister at the moment. They are a little cranky, though. They're overdue for their naps."

"Understandable." She turned towards her son. "Looks like this one could use a nap, too. How was y'all's trip down, Shelly?"

But Sheldon didn't reply, and she began to wonder if he'd even heard her. He touched her shoulder and gently ran his hand down the length of her arm.

"When did the doctors say you could leave here?" he asked.

"Soon as I kick this nasty infection," she said. "And the way things are going, it can't be long."

"I wanted to come sooner," Sheldon said. "I wanted to see you."

"I know, baby," Mary said, patting Sheldon's hand. "But you're here now. That's the important thing."

"Better late than never," George muttered.

"Now, Junior, don't start that," Mary scolded. "Shelly's a family man now with a big career. I told him to stay away. There's no need watching me when he's got important things to take care of."

Sheldon stuck his tongue out at his brother. His brother just grimaced in return.

"But I am sorry it took this to get you to come back to Texas," Mary said. "When I get better you're gonna have to come down for the family reunion. Randy just bought a new grill, one of those big electric ones, and I've been dying to eat some barbeque chicken off that thing."

Sheldon nodded. Then he laid his head against Mary's arm. "I'll come," he said. "I promise."

Mary reached up and stroked her son's hair, and then laid her head back contentedly as she did so. "I love you, Shelly," she said.

"I love you too, Mom," Sheldon said. He lifted his head and looked as his mom with eyes that were sad and weary. "Don't leave me," he said. Mary closed her eyes with a smirk, finding the statement humorous.

"I'm sick, Shelly, not dying," she said. "So quit all that fussing."

George would later chastise Sheldon for the statement, and the brothers stood arguing outside the hospital while Amy tried to keep the kids from digging into the ashtrays... and from hearing George's rather colorful language. He'd insisted that any real man would have known that Mary was depending on them to be strong, especially since Dad was gone. Sheldon was infuriated by the accusation and, in an ironic twist, accused his siblings of not caring. That statement lured Missy into the fight, and with one hand on her hip and the other pointing accusingly at both of her brothers, she asked where the hell either "man" had been when "Mom was puking her guts out all night after her treatments?"
Amy tried not to meddle, but inside she knew that Mary needed no one's pity; their mother was a steel magnolia, and besides, she wouldn't have expected her baby son to act any other way.

When they got back to California, Sheldon had grown only slightly calmer. Some nights, Amy would sit up in bed and watch him as he lay motionless in a dreamless sleep and sweep his hair to the side with her pinky finger. She knew his brand of devotion was absolute and ran deep; and the sweet agony of watching him suffer only made her cherish having his love even more. She knew that the wedding vows mentioned being there "for better or for worse," and this was one of the worse times. But she was committed to Sheldon, to her family. In those quiet nights, she would chastise herself for longing for church bells and rose bouquets and wedding cake. This was not the time for such talk; she would have to wait. She would have to be patient.

Three years later, however, her dream of a wedding was as dead as Mary Cooper was alive.

Penny was guiding Amy through a pedicure. Her own, not Amy's. She had caught a glimpse of her feet while sitting on the toilet that morning, and had declared an emergency. Even though Amy was doing as well as could be expected for a woman who couldn't remember the last time she'd purchased nail polish, their conversation needed a little work.

"What's the matter?" Penny asked. "The cat got your tongue?"

"No."

More silence. Penny tried again.

"You seem a little… I dunno, down lately."

"There have been a few things nagging at me. Perhaps such concerns are manifesting themselves in my uncharacteristic quietness."

"I think so," Penny said. "Wanna talk about it?"

Amy looked up at Penny for a moment, then resumed pumicing her feet.

"Sheldon and my sex life has grown stale."

Penny choked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"While there are a variety of things on my mind, I think you are best suited to address this one."

"Um, thanks… I guess," Penny said. And then a thought crossed her mind. "So when you say that you guys have a 'sex life,' you mean like… more than once?"

Amy looked at Penny, puzzled. "Of course."

Penny punched the air with her fist. "So that's cleared up."

"It's not even about the sex," Amy continued. Penny winced. "It's about the romance."

"Okay, and just one more thing," Penny said, "when you say 'romance,' you aren't just talking about that thing y'all do when you try on different outfits in front of Sheldon and then chart his heart rate?"

"As romantic as that is, sometimes I want a little more. For example, the last time we had sex—"
"La la la la la," Penny started chanting, involuntarily.

Amy was confused. "Why are you saying 'La la la'?

"Um, uh," Penny stammered, "It's that thing pregnant women do when they, you know, get that thing that makes them go 'la la la' at the weirdest times. Those hormones are crazy, am I right?"

Amy turned away pensively. "I never experienced that during my pregnancy."

"Oh," Penny said, scrambling to scrape up some explanation. "That's because it's rare. Mostly only happens in women from Nebraska."

Amy got lost in deep thought. "I wonder what neurological mechanism would provoke such an odd tic."

Penny shrugged. "Who knows? But while you're figuring that out, I'm going to go and pee."

Penny had quickly learned that frequent urination was a pregnant woman's best friend and excuse of choice when she had to flee a dicey situation. She'd used it to get out of a conversation with her dad about the latest horrors committed by her meth-selling brother, she used it to avoid Leonard's downward spiral after his mother told him he had psychological issues because of his penis-size and she even used it to avoid getting a ticket for speeding. That day, she would be using it to get out of a conversation on the Shamy's sex life (barf). She hoped that after she got back, Amy's unique brain would have moved on to other topics of less uncomfortable subject matter.

Since actually using the toilet only took about 30 seconds, she decided to prolong her visit by scrubbing out the disgusting tub (Leonard was going to die!) and plucking her eyebrows (which seemed to get more unruly as her hormones got out of whack). After fifteen minutes had gone by, she re-emerged.

"So yeah," she began as she walked back to the couch, "did you catch any of Jeopardy last week? There was a neurobiologist up there that was kicking ass."

Amy perked up at the news. "I'm afraid I didn't, but I'm always glad to see someone of my ken doing well. But returning to what we were talking about before your—rather long—trip to the bathroom—"—Penny grimaced, biting her bottom lip—"...Sheldon has been so consumed with his work and the finances and buying a house, it's like, our time together is dedicated to logistical talk and our relationship is becoming a footnote."

"Awww," Penny moaned, starting to sympathize with her friend. "Well, I know he was really doing well there for a while. Didn't you say he used to bring you flowers?"

Amy nodded. "Yeah, and all different kinds, too. Pastry, buckwheat, rice, and—of course—self-rising." She sighed. "You just don't get the same results with all-purpose."

"Wait... you're talking about, like... baking flour?"

"Yeah," Amy answered. "What did you think I was talking about?"

"Nothing," Penny said. It was almost hard to feel sorry for those two.

"And then when we do make love," Amy continued, "Sheldon is ambivalent or preoccupied."

Penny rose to go and pour herself a glass of water. "Isn't that what you signed up for when you two got together? Bernadette said something about 'aloof but effective.'"
"Oh that? That was a lie I came up with before we had ever even engaged in intercourse. In reality, Sheldon has proven that he can be a very passionate lover."

Penny just… couldn't picture it. Mostly because she didn't want to.

"What do you and Leonard do when the mattress dancing falls off?" Amy asked.

Penny searched her memory as she walked back to the couch. Considering that being in the "family way" had done a number on her own sex life, she was beginning to wonder if she was even in a position to be giving advice. "Well I can tell you what doesn't work… talking about it."

"Really? I thought the resolution of all relationship problems started with communication?"

"Trust me," Penny said, "anything that involves talking is the enemy. Getting right back on the wagon is a lot more fun and… who can argue while they're having sex?"

"Sheldon and I once had a truncated debate on irrigation practices in South America that overlapped with some rather spicy bedroom talk. The matter never was resolved between us, but the evening was a delight nonetheless." She sat back, seeming to remember it with a pleasant reverie. Penny shook her head.

"Worst porn ever."

"What was that?" Amy said.

"Nothing. Look Amy, you have to think of a way to spice up your sex life, maybe make it a little kinkier?"

"By 'kinkier' you mean?"

"You know, something forbidden, dangerous, tantalizing: a little spanking or biting, maybe some handcuffs?"

"Sheldon's a prude; he'd never entertain anything so salacious." She thought a moment. "And come to think of it, I am unsure as to how pain could augment pleasure."

"Forget the biting. How about some belly dancing? Trust me. That class I took at the rec center did wonders for our marriage."

Amy turned her mouth at this. "As enjoyable as I find the occasional chicken dance, learning to dangle rhythmically from an upright pole sounds like it requires more of me than I have to give." She thought a moment. "Besides, I've never had the abs you used to have."

"Hold on," Penny said, ever-so-slightly offended. "Used to have?"

"Well, you are expecting, Bestie, and that baby you got swimming in you has affected your belly accordingly. I've seen the stretch marks."

"AMY!" Penny gasped. "Those aren't stretch marks. They're, they're… beauty marks."

"Well under that paradigm," Amy said, "your stomach is very, very beautiful."

"Can we just get back to you?" Penny said, and then couldn't help but wonder how Amy's sex life had somehow become the preferable topic. She paused, thinking hard for a while, then slammed her hand on the armrest. "I got it! What about games?"
Amy, for the first time, seemed to actually be considering a suggestion. "Games?"

"Yeah. You guys like games. How about a little strip poker or, better yet, R-Rated Counterfactuals. You two get turned on with all that nerd talk."

A smile appeared on Amy's face. "That just might be the solution to our little coital conundrum. Although I would re-name it Coitus Counterfactuals... the alliteration has a rather pleasing ring to it."

Penny nodded. "At this point you should be trying to get pleasure any way you can."

"In a world where atheists and cat lovers team up, what is their logo?"

Sheldon furrowed his brow, combing through possible answers. He repeated the puzzle to himself. "In a world where atheists and cat lovers team up, what is their logo?" After several labored seconds, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

It was the first time she recalled him not having an answer at all.

"Richard Dawkins petting a cat."

Sheldon returned a blank stare. Amy helped him along.

"What is the nickname for Richard?"

"Dick."

"And what is another word for cat?"

"Feline?"

"No."

"Kitten?"

"No."

"Mouser?"

"No," Amy answered with a sigh. "It starts with a P."

Sheldon thought again. "Oh." Then he sat back aghast, scandalized. "Ohhhhh!" he gasped. "AMY! Did you come up with that?"

She hung her head in shame. "No," she sighed. "Penny did."

"Figures," he muttered. "It has none of the elements of a typical counterfactual, not the least of which is basis in reality. I defy you to tell me under what circumstances would atheists and cat lovers form a team? And why would that team need a logo?" He shook his head. "I'd much prefer to hear yours."

"I haven't had the chance to come up with a proper one," Amy said, regretfully. "Although I did tinker with the idea of a world were radioactive material was necessary for reproduction, and came up with some rather saucy double entendres for Brazil nuts."
Sheldon worked the elements of the puzzle in his mind, nodding. "Understandable, since Brazil nuts contain an inordinate amount of radium and the term 'nuts' is a euphemism for male genitalia."

Amy fanned herself. "It really gets you hot under the collar."

Sheldon, however, was not so moved. "This is much more difficult than I anticipated. Apparently, my vivid imagination is useless when it comes to contemplating erotic historical fiction."

"I suspected that might happen, so I came prepared," she said, suddenly producing a box from underneath the bed. "I thought we might enjoy this instead."

"Spin the Naughty Wheel?" Sheldon said, reading the lid. "How is it played?"

"Very simply," Amy explained. "There is a die and then a spinning wheel that bears the names of several body parts. If you roll an odd number you have to massage that body part with your hands; if you roll an even number, you have to touch that body part with your mouth."

He looked at her with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

"I would like to evoke the 'this game is against my religion' clause of the Relationship Agreement," he said. "It's surely against the religion in which I was raised."

"There is no such clause."

"Which, looking back, was a grievous oversight."

"Even your mother would be baffled by your current trepidation. Every single part on that wheel is above the waist."

"Not true," he protested. "I've already seen feet and knees, both being locations that could not be more inappropriate for a game of this nature."

"Then we won't do feet and" —sigh— "knees."

Sheldon paused a moment. "Do we have to play with the lights on?"

"How else will we see the board?"

"The game should have been printed with glow in the dark ink, an omission that shows a complete lack of forethought on the part of the game's engineers. This is a bad sign, Amy."

She handed him the die, and he took it as if she had handed him a slime-oozing bug. Then he snatched up the box top, looking at it with scrutiny.

"And may I ask in what seedy shop of ill-repute you defiled yourself by purchasing this 'game'?"

"I bought it off Amazon dot com in the section "Safe Sex for Teens." Amy said, exasperated. "This is, quite literally, child's play." Sheldon looked as reluctant as ever. "Just... just keep an open mind, Sheldon. It'll be fun." He sighed, a good sign. "Now roll."

He began to jiggle the plastic cube in his closed hand, muttering "odd, odd, odd" to himself. He dropped it: he'd rolled a four. He jumped.

"Oh dear," he said.

"Now spin the dial," Amy purred. Just as he flicked the arrow, there was... this:

Sheldon turned his head to the door. Amy closed her eyes, frustrated.

"She's supposed to be asleep," she whispered loudly.

"Well, clearly she isn't," Sheldon replied.


"If we don't answer, she'll go back to bed," Amy said. Sheldon barely registered the suggestion.

"What is it, Aditi?" he called. Amy went red.

"There's a monster under my bed," Aditi whined.

"No, there isn't, DeeDee!" That was Robert. "Your bed is so close to the floor that only a flat monster could be under there, and there is no such thing as a flat monster."

"Yes there is!" Aditi screamed back.

"Aditi," Amy said. "Please go back to bed. Your brother will be with you to keep you safe."

"I don't wanna go back to bed," she said. "I'm too scared."

"Come in," Sheldon said. Amy, stunned by this invitation, scooped up the game and tossed it under the bed as the door slowly swung open. "What would you have us do, Aditi?" he asked.

"Can I sleep with you?"

Amy shot him a look that would have instilled the fear of God is a less brave (or less clueless) man. Sheldon, however, was not that man.

"Fine, but just for tonight," he said. Suddenly overjoyed, Aditi ran for the bed and jumped in, snuggling into the comforters in the middle of the bed. Robert stood at the door, unsure as to how to proceed, and then finally walked off, back to his room.

Amy could barely suppress her fury.

"Sheldon," she muttered, "surely you've forgotten that Aditi can't sleep with us tonight."

"Why not?" he asked. "I mean, other than the obvious reasons of establishing poor sleeping habits in our daughter, enabling her belief in monsters and reinforcing her growing emotional dependency. But, we all but regulated those concerns to the trash heap months ago."

"Because we were in the middle of something. Remember?"

"Yes," he shrugged. "But nothing that can't wait." He climbed over to his side of the bed and started to settle in for the night.

"Sheldon, dear," she said. "Perhaps it would be best if Aditi returned to her own bed."

He snorted. "I doubt she would agree with that."
"She might not, but you should," she said, and, snatching the entire blanket off the bed in one fell swoop, she jumped down and marched out of the room. Gob-smacked, Sheldon looked down at Aditi. She smiled back brightly, wholly unconcerned by the outburst. He rose and followed the cloud of smoke where Amy had blazed her way to the living room.

"Why are you sleeping out here?" he asked.

"I might as well be sleeping alone, anyway," she said. "The difference is negligible."

"Actually, here you will truly be sleeping alone, while in our bed, there were will be three of us. Additionally," he said, pointing in her direction, "you are currently reclining on a couch, while in there," he said pointing in the direction from whence he'd come, "you would be on a bed and, frankly, I can't imagine why you would be so unnecessarily reckless with your spinal column alignment."

"It's my body, I'll do whatever I please," she said, not really seeking to spar with him any longer. She grabbed a pillow from the couch, put it over her head and started crying.

Officially stumped, Sheldon shuffled back to the room and took Aditi's hand.

"You have to go back to your bed," he said.

"Why?" she asked, her face instantly returning to its previous horror.

"You just do," he said, unwilling to explain the finer points of the social implications regarding mixed-gender sleeping arrangements.

"But there's a monster under my bed," she reminded him.

"There is no monster, Aditi. Now come on." He lifted her up, and carried her back to her room, while she clung fiercely to his neck. He lowered her to her bed, pulled the covers up to her chin, and then walked out. As soon as he hit the door, she began screaming bloody murder.

"SHUT-UP, DEEDEE!" Robert yelled.

Sheldon turned back around. "Don't tell your sister to shut-up," Sheldon said. "It's not polite."

"But she won't SHUT UP!" he yelled again. Sheldon glared at the four-year-old, noise-ordinance enforcer with the steeliest look he could muster; the younger Cooper matched his look, however, undaunted. Sheldon spun on his heels and headed to the living room.

"Your son Robert is being unapologetically surly," he said to the mound of comforters and pillows on the couch, "I believe some action should be taken… preferably on your part." But the mound disagreed.

"Go to hell, Sheldon," it replied.

Frustrated, Sheldon turned. "I may quite possibly already be there," he muttered, and walked back to the twins' room. Upon returning, he found that Robert had taken his bad-mannered show on the road, and was now standing over his sister, yelling and beating on the bed.

"Shut up DeeDee! You're a crybaby!"

Sheldon marched over and spun the boy around. "Apologize," he demanded.

"NO!" Robert yelled. Sheldon shrugged.
"Okay, then; by your actions, you've demonstrated your desire to be in what is, most appropriately, referred to as 'time-out.' He pulled Robert by the arm and walked him over to the corner. "You'll leave that spot when you apologize to your sister...and to me." He instinctively turned to Aditi, whose plaintive wails went on unabated, and he wondered if she'd even heard her brother's pleas for auditory mercy. He walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. A second later, he heard Robert crying loudly.

He looked down the hall at his sobbing wife, while behind him was a chorus of twin bawlers.

Overwhelmed, he walked back to his room, turned out the lights and collapsed into bed.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Spontaneity is the enemy of fun. Duh.

As had been scheduled in an email, commanded by his boss, and persuasively argued by Amy, Sheldon entered the Physics Building's conference room bright and early on Thursday morning for the delegates to the Meeting of the Science Education Commission. According to the email, elite science institutions throughout the U.S. had been invited to send professors who, ahem, "had an invested interest and altruistic desire to lend their professional expertise in spearheading and implementing bicoastal initiatives that would enrich the nation's high school and undergraduate science programs, building better scientists for tomorrow." There was quite possibly nothing Sheldon wanted to do less. Other than kill crickets in the bathroom. That was Amy's job.

As was typically the case, he arrived early, took his seat towards the head of the table, and… waited. The conference room began to fill up, and soon became noisy with the sounds of chatter, laughter and persons partaking of the free coffee and donuts that served as the consolation prize at these occasions. Sheldon, disinclined to socialize, retreated into the pages of some work he'd brought along. Soon enough the meeting begin. Unfortunately, it didn't end soon enough.

Dr. Gablehauser sat at the head the conference table in the overcrowded room and was bringing his speech to a close.

"…Caltech is happy to be a part of this initiative, and we hope that all of you will make the most of these workshops in Washington, DC so we can fortify our outreach efforts and undergraduate program here at the University." He stood. "Unfortunately, I won't be able to field questions at this time, as I am due for another appointment. If you have concerns, send them to me by email, or leave written inquiries with my secretary, and I will get back with you as soon as possible." He scanned the room. "And… you are dismissed." Then he pointed to Sheldon. "May I speak to you a moment?"

Sheldon looked around himself curiously and then, realizing Dr. Gablehauser was speaking to him, walked forward.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Siebert let me know that you approached him in regards to this event."

"Indeed I did, and—" Sheldon began, but Dr. Gablehauser interrupted.

"Please direct any future inquiries to me and to me only. Are we clear?"

Sheldon was startled by Dr. Gablehauser's uncharacteristic severity.

"Well, I would hate for you to take it the wrong way, but—"

"Sheldon," he said with a scolding tone, "Are we clear?"

Sheldon didn't miss the fact that Dr. Gablehauser had omitted his title. He nodded.
"Excellent," Dr. Gablehauser said, and promptly left.

"Well what's got his bloomers in a bunch?" Sheldon said after the man had left. Sheldon tucked his folder under his arm and was turning to leave when Leonard, along with Leslie Winkle, walked up behind him.

"Hey, Sheldon," Leonard called. Sheldon turned around at the sound of his name. At the sight of Leslie, his shoulders sunk.

"Hey, Dumbass," Leslie said, smiling brightly.

"Leslie," Sheldon began, frustration in his voice, "when are you going to recognize that my name is, in fact, not 'Dumbass' but Dr. Sheldon Lee Cooper?"

"When you stop being a dumbass," she said.

Leonard snickered at that. Sheldon's head snapped in his direction.

"And I guess you find her funny?" he asked.

"She has her charms."

"Charms that you have been intimately familiar with," Sheldon said.

"Classy," Leslie said, sarcastically. "So let's just forget all about that knocked-up broad he has at home."

"Anyway," Leonard said, skipping over both comments, "I had no idea you were a part of this thing. Honestly, I'm a little surprised to see you here."

"Trust me, I find my presence here just as surprising as you do," Sheldon sighed. "Especially now that you and Little Miss I'm-a-Terrible-Scientist showed up." He chuckled.

Leslie looked at him with dumbfounded silence.

"Ouch," she deadpanned.

He smiled smugly to himself. "Words hurt, don't they?"

She rolled her eyes. "Dumbass," she muttered, and walked away.

But Leonard couldn't shake Sheldon's earlier comment, and blinked his eyes with agitation. "Why are you surprised I'm here?" he asked, preparing to be offended.

"Well the missive clearly states that they are looking for delegates with professional expertise," Sheldon explained. "Your selection leads one to believe that you could only have been chosen for your expertise in scientific redundancy. Either that or as cautionary tale for young scientists of what not to do."

"My research is not redundant, Sheldon."

"Leonard, recognizing that you have a problem is the first step to change."

Before Leonard could address the barb, the secretary made an announcement.

"If anyone needs travel arrangements for this trip, please see me within 48 hours. Requests after
that time will put you at risk of not being approved."

"Don't remind me. An all-expense-paid trip to our nation's capital with air travel, hotel stay and a food allowance included." Sheldon shook his head. "I swear this job gets less attractive by the day."

"Aw, it's not all bad," Leonard said. "Look at the bright side. This will be a chance to get a little time away from home."

Sheldon visibly perked up at that notion. "That is one way to think about it," he said. "I could probably use a break away from home."

Leonard took a step back, shocked. "That's funny coming from you, Mr. Family Man."

"While my devotion to my family is unwavering, and my excellence as a father and life companion are indisputable," Sheldon began, as Leonard rolled his eyes, "even the most capable of men need respite from the quotidian cares of life. I was subjected to a rather rattling spectacle of tears and tantrums last night, and a brief reprieve may be just what the doctor ordered."

Leonard shrugged. "Yeah, Penny and I have hit an impasse in the baby-naming department. Things are a little tense on the home front."

"Then are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Sheldon asked.

"Absolutely. We can room together like old times and blow off a little steam."

"Actually," Sheldon said, "I was thinking that we could play to our strengths: Amy and I could name your child while you and Penny could oversee a bedtime ritual that Amy and the twins would find physically and emotionally satisfying, Respectively, of course." He paused after this, thinking a bit, and then continued as if he were a genie bestowing Leonard his third wish. "However, I'll concede that your idea sounds more feasible."

"And then again," Leonard said, already weary from that foreboding bit of crazy, "maybe it doesn't."

"Nonsense. As we will be travelling together and, no doubt, have some leisure time in the evenings, I will begin to compile an after-work itinerary for our trip away."

The thought of that, frankly, scared Leonard. "Um, I was thinking of something a little more spontaneous."

Sheldon wagged his finger. "It would be much better if we went in with an established plan, Leonard. Spontaneity is the enemy of fun."

"Where in the hell did you hear that?" Leonard asked.

"Nowhere," Sheldon said, smugly. "I came up with that myself." With that he started towards the door.

"Of course you did," Leonard said, and started behind him.

It was dinnertime, and Amy was furiously stir-frying vegetables when Sheldon walked through the door. She turned her head to him briefly before returning to her cooking. Dropping his keys in the bowl and his bag to floor, he approached the kitchen with hesitation.
"Hello, Amy," he said, a tacit effort at reconciliation.

"Hello, Sheldon," she said without looking up. She was less than angry but not quite cheery. Sheldon advanced into the kitchen's political borders and washed his hands. He then pulled a packet of Kool-Aid from a canister on the counter, along with a pitcher. As he stirred the blue mixture into icy water, something popped back into Amy's mind.

"Would you have any idea why I found Robert this morning balled up in the corner asleep?"

"Most likely because he shares your stubborn personality and indomitable will," Sheldon answered.

"Right, because I'm the stubborn one."

"You do have a certain unrelenting nature that can be rather persuasive."

"You're evading my question."

"Fine," Sheldon said, and paused from stirring. "You will probably be elated to learn that I put him in time-out. All by myself."

"Elated no, but I am glad that you actually are beginning to discipline the children without my assistance. Contrary to popular belief, I do not enjoy being the bad guy around here."

"As you have informed me repeatedly."

"And I appreciate that you have listened."

Sheldon stood up a bit more erect and, tapping his spoon along the side of the pitcher, moved to place it on the table. "Thank you."

"Although you failed in some key areas of its execution, and thus did not get the desired results."

Sheldon rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "The only results I sought last night were some means by which I could swiftly and painlessly off myself." Amy looked at him with a hint of pity. "Last night was one of the more harrowing nights of my life."

Amy walked towards him, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm sure I contributed to that," she said, contritely.

He turned his head away, fidgeting with his fingers. "You might have played a minor role."

"I admit I used childish and hostile communication methods last night that likely confused you further and didn't contribute to the peace of the home. For that, I am sorry."

Sheldon was relieved. "Well, at least I got one apology."

"But you owe me one as well."

He wilted. "For what? Being summarily attacked at every angle? Sustaining permanent damage to my hearing? Suffering a night alone in bed?"

"No. For not being willing to communicate with me about the important things." She drew a little closer and her tone grew tender. "We aren't just parents, Sheldon. We're also a couple."

"A fact I'm aware of."
"But I think you forget sometimes."

"Well, for that… I'm sorry."

Amy drew closer and touched his arm. "I forgive you."

"And, while we're communicating," Sheldon said with a renewed freedom of speech, "I should have you know that I've been called upon to attend a conference in Washington, DC in a couple days. The timing has been forced upon me."

"Aww," Amy said with some disappointment.

"Lest you think this is some ploy to return to my days as a swinging bachelor," —Amy mentally chuckled at this bit of revisionist history— "I assure you that if there were any way to get out of it, I would."

"I know about the academic world, and honestly you have traveled very little since we've been together. I don't begrudge you that, Sheldon."

"But I seemed to detect some disappointment."

"Oh that," she said. "It's just that my first job interview is coming up and I'm sorry that you will be away when I go to it."

"Wow," Sheldon said, looking away. He'd forgotten. "Is that already upon us?"

"It is."

"I rue the fact that I won't be there to accompany you."

"I don't need you in the interview with me Sheldon. I'm quite capable of promoting myself without your assistance. I merely was hoping you'd be around for moral support."

"Then pardon my absence. Perhaps you can keep me posted from afar."

She nodded. "I imagine I can."

She returned to the food, transferring it to a bowl and then to the table.

"And, returning to last night's adventures," Sheldon said, "I think you should know about some fascinating conclusions that Leonard's mother has reached regarding the 'monster under the bed' phenomenon."

"I will listen," Amy said, "but I think Aditi just wants to be with us. That and she's at an age where she has difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. Honestly, it's not rocket science. I am a neurobiologist as well, and I find some of Beverly's conclusions rather… what's the word…" As she groped for the elusive word, she poured two glasses of milk for the twins. Suddenly, the word hit her. "Ah, crazy."

Sheldon shook his head. "You discredit her, but she had some rather telling information on the unresolved disappointment that a child feels at being ejected from the metaphorical cocoon of babyhood, which manifests itself in said child's nocturnal avoidance of sleep."

"Didn't Leonard wet the bed into puberty?"

"I believe he did."
Amy nodded. "Honestly, Sheldon, that's all I need to know."

Leonard was in the bedroom packing a suitcase and having even more trouble than usual determining what to bring. Penny usually helped him with this kind of stuff, but since their argument from a couple days earlier, they were still on shaky ground.

That's what Leonard hated most about asserting himself. He sometimes wasn't sure if it was worth the fallout.

Just as he was swapping out his striped ties for the paisley ones for the fifth time, Penny appeared in the bedroom door. He took a glance over his shoulder then returned to packing.

"I get it," she said.

Leonard stopped moving, but didn't turn around. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yeah," she repeated. "It totally got past me that you didn't like Rhiannon."

"It's not that I didn't like it—" Leonard said, but she interrupted.

"No, I know. I barged ahead without making sure about how you felt about it." She entered the room and drew closer, standing just behind Leonard and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Leonard smiled because… that was exactly it. He turned around and gave Penny a hug.

"I'm sorry, too," he said over her shoulder. "I… probably could have told you in a better way." He rubbed her back. "I hate us fighting. I really do."

"I do, too," she said. She pulled back and they looked at each other awhile. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes.

"I want this baby to have the best life ever," she said.

"Me, too," Leonard agreed.

"And if she grows up to be an actress like me, I want her name to sound totally awesome."

Leonard hedged a bit. "Or if she wants to, you know, get her degree, her name should look good on her thesis."

Penny laughed. "Yeah, that too." She patted his chest. "So, think about some names while you're in D.C. and I'll think of some names, and we'll go back to the drawing board when you get back."

"That's a plan," Leonard said. "So are we good?"

"Yep," she answered, and maybe even smiled a little. Then she looked down at his suitcase. "Oh we are so not good."

He turned back around and looked at the suitcase. "I thought you said those were my summer colors."

She pulled free and started sorting through clothes. "Not this. Not this. Not this. And hell no."

"Why do I even have those shirts if you never let me wear them?"
"Good point," she said. "They might not be here when you get back."

Leonard and Sheldon were two days into conference and, predictably, Sheldon was wilting fast. Turns out the majority of the workshops only mentioned science in passing, and instead were composed of long stretches of some of the worst role-playing games Sheldon had ever come across. Leonard kept telling him they weren't actually RPGs, but exercises in learning to think like young scientists, but it was all hogwash as far as Sheldon was concerned. After dragging themselves back to the hotel, Sheldon had his mind set on a night of room service and online gaming—after a Skype chat with the family. But Leonard thought differently.

"Remember? Friday night was going to be our Bro Night," he reminded Sheldon. "Men being men; boys being boys."

"That plan was borne of the mistaken notion that after a long day of mental abuse we would still have the energy to prowl this city seeking further diversion."

"Well, I promised James T. Olson that we would accompany him for dinner tonight."

Sheldon's head snapped to Leonard. "The James T. Olson?"

"Yes, the James T. Olson."

"The James T. Olson that has spent a career making discoveries through deep inelastic scattering experiments?"

"The very one. I ran into him at the urinals. Really cool guy. He invited me to join him for dinner."

"Did you tell him you have a friend?"

"Of course I did. He said we could both come."

Sheldon clasped his hands together in glee, and instantly became lost in reverie. "O Washington D.C. – I fear thy Potomac River, hallowed buildings and four quadrants have not seen the raucous havoc we are due to inflict on thee."

Leonard squinted at him in confusion. "Yeah, watch out D.C. Nerds on the loose," he said sarcastically. "Anyway, his car is coming for us in about 25 minutes, so we have to get ready."

"Oh drats," Sheldon moaned. "What shall I wear?"

"I dunno. Penny picked out an outfit for me," Leonard said.

"I should have had Amy do the same," Sheldon said with regret. "Since the moment we've met she's had a certain flair for fashion that I never could be bothered with."

Leonard shook his head. Maybe he should have had Penny pick out an outfit for Sheldon, too.

When the James T. Olson first had told Leonard that as they dined, they would ponder the most basic triggers of man's existence, Leonard imagined an evening discussing the Big Bang Theory, abiogenesis, and maybe even a little quark theory.

Turns out, Dr. Olson was talking about the strip club.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

This is what Sheldon's mom used to call the "whore pit."

"Leonard," Sheldon said as he uneasily alighted from the hired car, "where are we?"

"It looks like a strip club," Leonard answered. "Although the sign says it's a 'Gentlemen's Establishment,' so maybe I'm mistaken and we'll just get lessons about which fork to use for the Caesar salad," he said sarcastically. Sheldon wasn't amused.

"Don't be naïve, Leonard," he said. "There's a silhouette of a naked woman on the door. Even I can see this is what my mother used to call the 'whore pit.' My father frequented them during the early days of his midlife crisis. And for the rest of his life, for that matter."

"Well, considering this is the haunt of choice for a world-renowned physicist, your father was in good company."

"Dr. Olson is almost 70 and has never even been married. Why would he possibly want to darken the door of a strip club?"

"Um, maybe because he's almost 70 and has never even been married?"

"Well, I have never entered a "gentlemen's establishment' before," Sheldon said, "and I don't intend to today." He backed up and opened the door of the soon departing car.

"Wait, wait, wait," Leonard pleaded. "Some of these places have a back room. Maybe he just came here for the menu, but we'll be cordoned off to enjoy food and fellowship with one of the great minds of our times."

Sheldon stared at the car, then back at Leonard, then back at the car before he slowly shut the door. "I will give this 'James T. Olson' a chance to redeem himself, but if even a sesame seed crosses my lips in this filthy place, I will not be responsible for my actions, so help me God or any other mythical force of good."

Leonard tapped on the car, signaling the driver to leave. They flashed their IDs to the bouncer and went inside.

"Yes, we're here with the James T. Olson party," Leonard said to the attendant by the door.

"This way," said the attendant, and then led them off to a private room.

"See. I told you," Leonard said over his shoulder as they wound their way through early-evening revelers.

The attendant pulled back a curtain and waved them inside. Seated on a lounger were Dr. Olson and several other men that Leonard didn't recognize. On a nearby table was an assortment of meats and sauces and hard breads, not to mention libations. At the sight of them, Dr. Olson jumped up and grasped Leonard's hand with a firm shake.
"So glad you could join us, Dr. Hofstadter," he said enthusiastically.

"Please, call me Leonard," Leonard said.

"Noted."

"Can I call you James?" Leonard asked nervously.

"No," Dr. Olson replied flatly. He turned his attention to Sheldon. "And this must be your friend Dr. Cooper." He held out his hand, but Sheldon recoiled at the gesture.

"I'd prefer to keep a professional distance. Never has the old adage, 'I don't know where your hands have been' rung truer." He paused. "By the way, I'm a huge fan of your work."

"Very well then," Dr. Olson said. "One out of two ain't bad." He motioned for them to sit down. Both men did with notable trepidation. Sheldon leaned in close and whispered into Leonard's ear.

"Do you think that patrons have actually engaged in coitus on these seats?" he asked.

"There's a real chance of some fluid exchange," he said. The words had barely crossed his lips before Sheldon popped up and stood.

"I'm sorry, is there a problem?" Dr. Olson asked.

"Yes. This place would probably look like a firework display on the Fourth of July under the scrutiny of a black light."

"What you don't know can't hurt you," Dr. Olson said jovially.

"Surely that can't be your personal motto. You've spent a lifetime probing the unknown."

"In more ways than one," Dr. Olson said, and erupted in laughter along with many of his guests. Just then, a woman clad in little more than a bikini appeared from behind the curtain.

"Alright boys," she purred seductively. "May the games begin."

Minutes later, Leonard and Sheldon found themselves walking down the street.

"We might be the first two men in history to be thrown out of strip club for being too sober and prudish," Leonard said.

"An honor I treasure," Sheldon said. "That place was, quite likely, the most lascivious and unsanitary location I've ever encountered. And those women refused to take no for an answer."

"Yeah, but that's their job, Sheldon. Besides, threatening to stun the stripper with the Vulcan nerve pinch if she touched you was a bit excessive."

"I had no intentions of actually injuring her, Leonard. It was simply a ploy to discourage her advances."

"You could have gotten us arrested."

"Which, honestly, would have been a welcomed alternative to a lap dance. While I do not look forward to being incarcerated, pardon my French, Leonard, but… c'est la vie."
Leonard sighed. "So what's next?"

"Well," Sheldon said, looking at his watch. "As it is only 8:13, we still might be able catch a bus back to the hotel."

"Awww, c'mon Sheldon. This is our guy time, remember? Surely we can find something more adventurous to do than whine into Skype at our women back home about how much we miss them."

Sheldon sighed. "Fine, what do you have in mind? A trip to an all-night Barnes and Noble? A decaf latte at a nearby coffee shop? A pick-up game of Dungeons and Dragons?"

Leonard pointed. "A bar."

Sheldon wilted. "Dear Lord."

"Come on, it shouldn't be so bad."

"That's what you said about the strip club."

After crossing the street, they walked into Barry's Bar and Grill. A sign out front touted the place as D.C.'s Number One Watering Hole. Upon entering, Leonard actually didn't find the place to be that bad. He glanced around and noticed patrons eating chicken tenders and burgers with fries.

"This place actually serves food," Leonard said. He took a seat at the bar.

"A poor selling-point at this juncture," Sheldon said.

"Sure, but you gotta admit it's better than the strip club."

"I wouldn't eat here," Sheldon replied, "if I were within five minutes of dying from a rare malady that could only be cured by ingesting fried, fatty food served in a dirty basket."

"Fine, at least get a drink."

The bartender walked over. "I'm Earl. What'll it be tonight, guys?"

"Um…" Sheldon searched his mind, finally taking a seat next to Leonard. "Ooh, I know: how about a virgin piña colada? Those are tasty."

Earl looked at him with supreme annoyance. "You want an umbrella with that, too, Nelly?"

"My name's Sheldon—Dr. Cooper to you—but if you have one, yes, thank you."

Leonard leaned over. "Sarcasm."

"Oh," Sheldon said, realization dawning on him.

"While your friend finds his balls, what do you want?" Earl asked Leonard.

"Are you wearing cologne?" Leonard asked.

Amazingly, with just a move of a single eyebrow, the bartender managed to somehow ask, What the fuck?

"I only ask," Leonard continued, "because I've been sneezing ever since I sat down, and I think
your cologne may be the culprit behind my sudden sinus distress. Not that I have a problem with that, or anything, I'm just… curious." The sentence was punctuated with a loud sneeze.

The bartender just stared at Leonard a while without saying anything. He didn't look pleased.

"Drinks, right," Leonard said with a sniffle. "Just bring us both two tonic waters. We have work in the morning."

The bartender walked off and Leonard exhaled for the first time in minutes. "Are bartenders always that mean?"

"Based on my previous experiences with Penny, I would say yes," Sheldon answered. Suddenly, they heard the loud sound of someone screeching.

"Good Lord," Sheldon said, "what is that dreadful noise?"

It was coming from the back of the room. For the first time, Leonard noticed the huge banner against the wall. It read "Karaoke Night".

Sheldon stood. "We have to go."

"Why?" Leonard asked.

"Under no circumstances will I subject myself to such caterwauling."

"Aww, but—" Leonard's rebuttal was interrupted but a loud sneeze. Then another. Then another. Then another. After the sixth sneeze, he surrendered.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

Their next stop was a coffee shop.

They walked in to find it completely empty. Empty, except for a droopy-eyed, pimply-faced barista that didn't look a day over 16.

"Hello, my name is Clarence,"—loud sniffle—"How may I help you?" He sneezed loudly into both hands and then wiped the snot on his apron. Sheldon and Leonard didn't even look at each other, but just turned around and walked out.

Half an hour later they were back in the hotel room, in their pajamas, sitting on their respective beds, with computers on their laps.

Leonard brought his headphones to his ears and listened to the familiar Skype dial tone. Moments later, Penny appeared on the screen.

"Leonard," she said happily and her face appeared on the screen. "How are you, sexy?"

Leonard smiled. "I'm good, I'm good." Then, he had to say it because it was true. "I miss you."

She smiled. "I miss you, too. But, I thought you and Sheldon were gonna go out tonight and have a little bro time?"

"Yeah, turns out we're bigger losers on the East Coast than we are in the West Coast. We went to a coffee shop and… got bored."
"Coffee shop?" Penny said. "That's your idea of a Bro Night?"

"Well, we might have stopped in a bar, first" —and a strip club— "but we couldn't get in the swing of things. Turns out they didn't have any Red Dead Redemption soundtrack music on the karaoke list."

Penny shook her head smiling a little. "Where's Sheldon?"

"On the next bed over. He's talking to Amy."

Indeed he was.

"Amy, if there were any remaining doubt, let it be known that strip clubs are as seedy and repulsive as they are rumored to be. I seriously considered ending my life several times throughout the night."

"I'm certainly glad you thought better of it," Amy said.

"As am I." He paused. "But first, where are my manners? How was your day?"

"Exciting," Amy said, a little bashfully. "I spent much of it preparing for the interview. An assistant professorship position at Pasadena University."

"Hmm, I don't like that place," he said.

"And why not?"

"I have my reasons."

"The main one being that it's not CalTech?"

"No, there are others." Pause. "Although that may be a compelling reason as well."

"Well, regardless of your personal aversions to the place, I hope I can count on your full support in my interview tomorrow."

"I wouldn't think of doing anything less," he said.

"Good."

There was a lull in the conversation, but then Sheldon perked back up. "Is Aditi still up?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," Amy said, glancing down at the clock on the screen. "It's close to midnight."

Sheldon confirmed the time again as well. "So it is," he said. "I only ask because, while in the University gift shop, I saw a magnificent beginner's science kit."

"Did you get one for Robert?" Amy asked, interrupting.

"Of course, I did. I'm appalled that you would ask," Sheldon said.

"My apologies," Amy said.

He pulled one out and began to rave on the wonders of the toy, showing her all the features and exciting uses. As Amy watched, contentment settled over her. She loved him like this, enthused, curious. This was the man she loved: smart, excited about life and amazing as a father. She could
have stayed in that moment forever.

"Are you listening, Amy?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, clearing her throat and listening anew. "What were you saying about the gyroscope?"

The following morning was Amy's interview. She pretended to be perusing the *Neuron* magazine in her lap, but in reality was mentally running through the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine. It was the only thing that could calm her down in situations like this one; she hadn't needed to do it in a long time.

"Dr. Fowler?"

She turned to find the receptionist standing a few feet away. "Yes?"

"I'll take you back now."

Amy nodded, then rose, and followed the receptionist down a corridor and into an office. Once inside, the chairman of the Biology Department, Dr. Corbin, rose and shook her hand.

"Please, have a seat, Dr. Fowler," he said.

She had read somewhere that on job interviews you should wait until the interviewer sits before taking a seat of your own. But she'd also read that one should defer to the interviewer so as not to appear aggressive. She had read a lot of things. It was all very confusing. She felt faint.

"You can have a seat," Dr. Corbin repeated.

"Of course," Amy said and sat down.

This was starting off wrong.

"I trust the Assistant chair took you on a pleasing tour of the university."

"Indeed she did," Amy agreed. "Your grounds are beautiful and you seem to have a very capable department." *Capable? Really, Amy? That's the best you can do?*

"Thank you," the chair said. "This department is the pride and joy of the School of Science." He shuffled through some papers. "So I've looked over your CV and as you know we are very impressed with your history in the field. A large body of published works, including a cover article in Neuron. What was that on again?"

"Cooperative long term potentiation can map memory sequences on dendritic branches, just one part of our team's tireless efforts at understanding the key structural component of the neuron."

"Indeed, which included your participation in the renowned project on addiction in lower-functioning marine species. If I'm not mistaken, you received a Harvey B. Quinton Award for your work."

Amy cleared her throat. "Well my team did. I had... suspended my career by that time."

Dr. Corbin returned his glasses to his face. "Yes, I see that," he said, peering at her CV again. "And what, may I ask, accounts for your absence in the thick of such exciting research?"
"I took some time off to raise a family. Twins actually."

He nodded absently. "Admirable work," he muttered, as if he found it anything but.

"But I haven't left the field entirely. I have occasionally moonlighted as a science consultant, and I've also conducted advanced level math prep tutoring sessions for graduate students during the end of the school terms."

Of course, he fixated on the wrong end of that sentence. "In what capacity did you serve as a science consultant?" he asked.


He furrowed his brow, and took his glasses from his face. "I was under the impression that that was a soap opera."

"It… it is," she said. "But one of the characters was dating a biologist. They wanted me to clean up the dialog."

"Hmm," he said, returning his glasses to his face and perusing his paperwork. "I see."

Amy felt deflated. She tried to think of some way to do damage control. "I am eager to return to the research field and continue my work. My detour was by no means a resignation of my academic passions and ambitions."

"Very well then," he said rising, barely acknowledging her statement. He held out his hand, Amy rose and took it. "This interview has been a pleasure for me, Dr. Fowler. We will be completing our interview process and get back to you shortly."

"Thank you for your time," Amy said.

"Thank you," Dr. Corbin replied.

She left the office and walked down the hall, took the elevator down to the first floor and went out to her car. On the drive home, she could only think one thing.

*My career is over.*

Later that night, Sheldon had received a call from Dr. Gablehauser requesting that they meet in Conference Room B of the hotel. His request carried with it the bizarre instruction not to mention the meeting to anyone. Sheldon generally hated meetings of all kinds (since they largely amounted to vacuous political wrangling and the receipt of assignments he didn't want to do), but the secretiveness awoke his curiosity.

Rising early, he'd dressed in the best of what he'd brought along, and arrived promptly at 7:30 AM, apparently before the day's official proceedings were due to begin. Upon opening the door, he was surprised to find that there were only four people there: Dr. Gablehauser, two men he didn't recognize and Dr. Siebert, whose attendance he found particularly shocking since he was under the impression that the president was back in California. The older of the unknown men stood as Sheldon approached the table.

"Hello, Dr. Cooper," he said, and held out his hand, "I'm Dr. John Lively, a representative with the Department of Defense."
The other man stood in turn, and held out his hand as well. "And I'm Dr. Bill Anderson with the Department of Energy." He motioned towards a chair. "Please, take a seat."

Sheldon did so. "What is the nature of this meeting?" he asked.

Dr. Siebert answered first. "While we hope that you have been enjoying the conference—"

"I have not," Sheldon interrupted.

"Well, honestly it doesn't matter," Dr. Siebert continued, "as the real purpose of your trip here was to secure your participation in a project headed by the US government in collaboration with the Large Hadron Collider. This project could have implications ranging from military applications to more efficient ways to meet energy demands worldwide. The candidates for participation have not been chosen lightly."

Sheldon sat up his chair, shocked… and enticed. "You mean this entire trip was a ruse?"

"'Ruse' might be a strong word," Dr. Siebert said. "Mingling in the greater scientific community never killed anyone, Dr. Cooper."

"But I've never been one to tempt Fate," Sheldon said.

Dr. Anderson spoke up. "Dr. Cooper, our respective organizations are embarking on an endeavor that carries with it a degree of secrecy and, as a result, we have been clandestinely combing the nation looking for elite physicists that would be able to work on this project. During our survey of respected persons in the field, your name came up time after time."

"Well, I can't say that I'm surprised," he said.

The two agency reps looked at each other and then at Dr. Siebert.

"He has a rather… well, should I say, interesting personality. It's an acquired taste."

"Regardless," Dr. Anderson said, "we have made our selections, and have used this conference as a means of securing our final roster of participants. By and large, we have our list compiled, although during the course of this event, we've kept our eyes open to some last-minute additions."

Sheldon wiggled in his chair, positively giddy. "So what other physicists do you have in mind?" He began rattling off the names of some of his contemporaries in the field, people he'd run into at conferences and physics watering holes online. "Meg Clarkson, Alessandro Lionne, Edward Kath, Lauren Thibodeaux, Pomita Mandar, Rae Jones… oh there are too many to name. You know what? I'll make you a list." He grabbed a nearby pad and started scribbling away, then suddenly looked up with a face of deep reflection. "Are you familiar with the work of Ruby Aquino? She's a recent import from an overlooked physics research institute in the Philippines, but she's making amazing contributions in the world of higher-spin gravity." He shrugged. "I'll put her name down."

"I'm familiar with some of those scientists, Dr. Cooper, and they are all theorists," Dr. Lively said. "We plan on including experimentalists as well."

Sheldon recoiled in horror. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because we've determined that we'll have more success in this endeavor if we use a… phenomenological approach to the project."

"Ew," Sheldon groaned, face askew. "I don't work with experimentalists."
"Why not?"

"Because experimental physics requires building, and teamwork, and, and…" —he recoiled— "undergraduates."

"Pardon my ignorance," Dr. Siebert interrupted, "but what do you mean by 'a phenomenological approach'?"

Sheldon sighed. "Phenomenology is the field of science, or methodology really, that blurs the line between the worker-bee data-collecting of experimental physics and the brilliant abstract mathematics and philosophical conjecture of theoretical physics."

The DoE representative spoke up. "If physics were a two-island nation," he explained, "Phenomenology would be the bridge that connects those two islands so its citizens could benefit from the resources of both islands."

Sheldon turned to the representative. "You explained that very quickly and simply."

"Thank you."

"I didn't mean that as a compliment."

Dr. Siebert interjected. "Dr. Cooper, do we have your commitment to the project?" he asked. Sheldon got the distinct feeling that it was more of a command than an inquiry and he hesitated a moment. Dr. Lively spoke up.

"Before you answer, you should know that we anticipate…” His voice dropped an octave and his face grew more serious than before. "Dr. Cooper, with the team we have assembled and the problem set before us, we have set our ambitions high." He slid a printed page across the table to Sheldon and the latter man reviewed it. "We anticipate making earth-shattering developments in the Quantum chaos and frankly… we will. I don't know why you got into Physics, Dr. Cooper, but if it had anything to do with changing the world… this is your chance."

Sheldon looked up, chastened. "I accept your invitation," he said, then paused for moment, and the gravity of the endeavor seemed to settle in on him. "In fact, it would be my honor."

All men nodded happily.

"In that case," Dr. Lively said, "there's something else you should know." He turned to Dr. Anderson, who continued to speak.

"We are offering you the position of head theoretical physicist on the project. We believe you have the respect in the field as well as the scientific aptitude to take on a leadership position."

Sheldon's mouth dropped.

"That is not an answer," Dr. Gablehauser remarked.

"I… I don't know what to say," he said finally.

"Say you will accept," Dr. Lively said.

"Absolutely. I accept."

"Excellent," Dr. Siebert said. "And again, you will not regret your decision. Any of you."
All the men rose and parted with cordial farewells. Sheldon left as well and walked down the hall in nothing short of a daze.

It was happening.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

What’s a man have to do to earn some respect in his own home?

They were scarcely ten minutes into their flight back home when it started.

"Ugh," Sheldon groaned for the hundredth time.

Leonard had seen this before and took the performance for what it most likely was: Sheldon's rather overt way of trying to coerce Leonard into being an audience for his griping. The sad thing was, Leonard was starting to cave. Against his better judgment, he looked up from the game he was playing on his tablet and turned to his travelling companion.

"What is it, Sheldon?" he asked, bracing himself for a classic playlist of complaints featuring any of Sheldon's greatest hits: the recycled air on planes, the simplicity of the "Mensa" tests in the sample magazines, the portions of the snacks, the filth of the bathroom, the man snoring, the baby crying, and the couple making out. Leonard privately wondered if there was any way for him to sleep through Sheldon's ranting with his eyes open.

"That trip was rather enjoyable," Sheldon said. Leonard turned to the man on his right in patent disbelief. As if to confirm the absurdity of the situation, Sheldon was doing the crossword—though rather quickly—without the faintest air of condescension.

"I'm sorry; I thought I heard you say you had a good time."

Sheldon glanced at Leonard then returned to his crossword. "I didn't say that. I said the trip was enjoyable. The altitude, I fear, has compromised your hearing. I would recommend that you chew a piece of gum to keep the passageways to your inner ear clear, and you are in luck. I have some in my carry-on if you care to have a piece. Regrettably it's a Hello Kitty brand, but it works just as well." He looked up pensively. "I suspect Aditi put it there."

Leonard, however, was more concerned with his original point. "Why were you groaning?" he asked.

"OH, my leg fell asleep. I have a prickly sensation running up and down my leg muscles. It tickles."

Nodding, Leonard tried to return to his game, but was now too distracted to do so. "What made it so enjoyable?" he asked.

Sheldon couldn't understand Leonard's shock. "I fail to see why you find that so surprising. Didn't you have a good time?"

"Um… it was a mixed bag. I mean, I almost got murdered at the bar, but on the other hand, any day that lets me blow off three lectures and sleep in till noon without any repercussions is in the running for the best day of my life."

"So why does it shock you that I enjoyed myself as well?"
"Oh, let's see, could it be because you threatened to leave several times? That our maid quit in the middle of our stay because you kept leaving her 'suggestions'? That you pissed off the Secretary of Education when you said his 'Liberal Arts degree was the educational equivalent of the prize at the bottom of a Happy Meal'?

Sheldon reflected on these occurrences. "We'll look back and laugh on those memories someday."

"Yeah, well not the Secretary of State… or President Siebert."

"I know," Sheldon said, "is it just me or is President Siebert awfully uptight? He should really learn to loosen up."

Leonard shook his head and looked down to discover that he had forgotten to pause his game and his character was now dead and lying in the street as stray players kept shooting him to make his body leap. Something crossed his mind.

"Hey, where were you this morning?"

"What do you mean?" Sheldon asked, and then shouted, "Done!" He'd finished the crossword.

"I mean, where were you? It's a simple question. I got up to go to the john around 10ish and you weren't there."

Sheldon's eyes started darting around and he looked exactly like someone who was lying. Since he was a terrible liar, Leonard took this as evidence that he was. "I was going to breakfast?"

Leonard didn't miss the uncertainty in Sheldon's voice. "You sure about that?"

"Of course I am," he said, his left eye already started to blink uncontrollably.

"Yeah? Because I don't believe you."

"Leonard," Sheldon gasped, sweat forming on his brow. "I am appalled that after so many years of friendship you would doubt the veracity of a statement of so little consequence."

Leonard tried to think of a reason why Sheldon could be lying, then realized that, even if he found out, he probably wouldn't care. Leonard had hunted down the motive behind many a Sheldonian lie only to find out that all he'd been hiding was the brand of cottage cheese he liked or the cheat codes to Angry Birds.

"I apologize," Leonard said. "I'm sure you're telling the truth."

"Good," Sheldon said, dabbing his brow with a cocktail napkin. "Because I am… telling the truth, that is. Absolutely."

Leonard rolled his eyes and picked up his virtual body and AK-47 from the ground; he had some serious ass to kick.

Penny and Bernadette were seated in the Fowler-Cooper abode waiting for Amy to return from the bedroom. A casual visit had turned into an impromptu special moment, as it was the first time Penny was meeting the boys that Howard and Bernadette had recently adopted. Penny had managed to glean that one was Indian and the other was Chinese, but there was still a lot that she didn't know. She'd barely caught a glimpse of them, since almost as soon as they had walked in, Howard had whisked them away to the bathroom. As she and Bernadette had waited for everyone
to return, Penny watched quietly as her friend tucked two toy cars into her purse. The action touched something in Penny, and she unwittingly touched her own belly. She could only imagine what new joys and wonders those two-year-old boys had brought to the Wolowitz home. She sighed.

"Adam and Joel," she asked. Bernadette looked up. "Those're their names, right?"

"Yep," Bernadette said, a bit nonchalantly.

"I mean, I'm not sure how this works and all, but, were those they names they came with?"

"No," Bernadette said, "but Howard's mom threw a tantrum when she found out we weren't going to have 'nice little Jewish babies that would be cuter than those ugly grandkids Rose Goldstein is always showing of at Shabbat.' Howard somehow talked her down by promising he would name them after her father and brother."

"Ah," Penny said with a nod. The story was easy to believe. "So," she said, clapping her hands together and smiling widely, "I mean, you're a mother, now!"

"Yep," Bernadette replied, possibly even less enthusiastically than the first time.

"Wow. Motherhood. I always imagined it must feel like…" Penny groped for a word. Bernadette filled in the blanks.

"Like having a perpetual headache while children run all around the house squealing and knocking things over?"

"I was going to say enriching and fulfilling, but tomato/tomahto, right?" She followed the statement with a weak laugh.

"It's an adjustment," Bernadette said and took a tight-lipped sip of her tea.

"If you don't mind my asking," Penny began gently, "what made you and Howard decide to adopt in the first place? I mean, not that there's anything wrong with it, but it just seemed to happen out of the blue."

"I never told you?" Bernadette asked, surprised. Penny shook her head. "Oh, well, when Howie and I first got married, we agreed that we would have kids no later than my 35th birthday. But when the time rolled around, I had just signed on as the principal investigator for a multi-year study on Toxoplasma gondii."

"What is Toxo, toxi, togon—whatchamacallit?" Penny asked.

"Toxoplasma gondii is a species of parasitic protozoa that can cause miscarriage, congenital defects, damage to the eyes and brain, or other problems in unborn babies. Since I would be working with it every day, pregnancy was an impossibility. You can imagine how disappointed I was when I found out." She took a coy sip from her tea.

"Yeah, I can only imagine," Penny said, pity in her voice. Then she perked up with a thought. "But… didn't you know you were planning on getting pregnant? You could have just worked on something else in preparation for—"

Bernadette cut her off. "Woulda, shoulda, coulda. It all happened so fast. It's just really a blur now." She turned to her left. "Amy!"
Amy had re-emerged at that moment bearing what looked like a plastic, soft-serve ice-cream dispenser sitting on a two-pronged stand.

"Bernadette," Amy said with glee, "I thought I had thrown it out but you are in luck."

"Yeah, lucky me," Bernadette said, deadpan.

"What's that?" Penny asked.

Amy held it up. "I present to you the Peter Potty Toddler Urinal. As your two tots are not fully potty trained, I thought you might get some use out this device: a potty urinal for boys. For toddlers of the male variety, it is said to cut the urinal training time down by 6 months, and if our experience with Robert is any indication, I can testify that is indeed true." She sighed longingly. "It even has a little button that makes a flushing sound."

"Yeah," Bernadette said, with a snarky edge. "Fun for the whole family."

"While I commend you for your enthusiasm," Amy said, "urinal training largely fell to Sheldon. I think it's one of the bonding experiences he looks back on most fondly."

A second later, two tiny bullets in the form of two little boys exploded from the restroom and started doing laps around the living room. Howard emerged a second later, yelling at them in what appeared to be Chinese. Amy didn't miss that tantalizing detail.

"Is that Mandarin?" she asked.

Bernadette nodded wearily. "I keep telling him to talk to them in English or they are never going to learn, but he insists we'll get better results if we ease them into their new environments."

"Hold on," Penny said, "I thought that the Indian one spoke English."

"According to Raj it's Marathi, and I swear I heard him teaching him curse words the other day."

The twins made another lap of the living room, with Howard in hot pursuit, and knocked down a lamp in the process. That's when Bernadette stood up.

"EVERYONE SIT DOWN AND SHUT THE HELL UP!" she yelled. Both twins stopped dead in their tracks like little deer in headlights. She made a gesture for them to sit on the floor, which they also did. Howard leaned against the couch, completely out of breath and clearly exhausted.

"Good boys," he panted weakly.

Bernadette rolled her eyes.

The doorknob to the apartment began to rattle and then slowly opened.

"Well, look who it is!" Penny cried.

Amy looked up to see Sheldon coming through the door, loaded down with luggage. Leonard was trailing him. Both women were pleasantly surprised, and Penny leaped up and ran over to her husband, greeting him with a sultry kiss. Amy also walked over and placed a hand on Sheldon's arm. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. The peanut gallery didn't miss the difference in their reactions.

"You're home early," Amy said.
Sheldon nodded, straining to pull his luggage further inside and stacking it up. "We were obliged to switch to an earlier flight due to the impending inclement weather on the East Coast."

"Why didn't you call?" Penny asked.

Leonard answered. "We didn't want to disturb you guys. Since we were together, we just caught a taxi."


Howard could remain silent no longer. "Ladies and gentlemen, the boys are back in town. The home team, failing to take advantage of the local enthusiasm, has decided to go with a more conservative play. The away team, however, has taken their marching band on the road, and one perky majorette in particular seems to have a thing for the quarterback."

"I'm the quarterback?" Leonard said with a toothy grin.

"I guess so," Penny said.

"It's clearly a minor league team," Howard muttered.

Sheldon turned to the little boys sitting on the floor. "Who are those children?" he asked. Amy answered.

"Those are Howard's and Bernadette's boys. Two years old. We're all meeting them for the first time."

Sheldon furrowed his brow. "But I thought they were twins?"

"Well that's what it said on the website," Howard said in a weak defense. "There's really no way to know for sure."

"Face the facts, Howard," Bernadette said. "We got two terrors for the price of one."

"Bernie!" Howard gasped. He walked over to the boys, placing a gentle hand on both of their shoulders. "We love you just the way you are," he cooed. Adam bit his hand. "Ow," he cried, shaking it. He turned to the group. "We're still working on biting."

Sheldon turned to Amy. "May I see you in the bedroom?"

Amy shrugged and followed behind him.

"Ahh," Howard said, not missing the opportunity to continue his previous jab. "We have a surprise play: not to be outdone and—wisely—taking advantage of his home-field advantage, the defense pulls out his trump card: the quickie."

Sniggers went around the room. Amy would have loved to think that she was on her way to seven minutes in heaven, but she knew Sheldon well enough to know that he wanted to tell her something, and probably something important. When they reached the bedroom, he shut the door behind them.

"My trip to our nation's capital was spectacular," he said. For Amy, this was... news.

"It didn't seem that way from your calls home."

"That's because it only became true this morning. I had an unexpected meeting with some
researchers." He took a deep breath. "Amy..."

Sheldon was not one for contrived suspense, and for a fleeting moment she began to wonder if it was good news at all.

"What is it?"

He looked down at his hands then looked back up at her. "As you well know, I've longed for a particular accomplishment for a great while," he said. She froze; was he about to say what she thought he was? "Based on some rather unsettling past experiences, I am hesitant to count my eggs before they hatch. But... if everything goes according to our preliminary discussions earlier today, I think I may finally be on the cusp of joining a project that will eventually garner me a Nobel Prize."

"Sheldon," she said, breathless. His boasts about inevitably winning the prize someday were storied, and he regularly made comments declaring that he was inches away from getting it. But she had never—and she did mean never—seen him so earnest, excited and even... timid when talking about it. This looked like the real thing.

He looked at her earnestly, his breaths quickening. "I cannot tell you all of the details, and honestly this conversation may be—in and of itself—some minor breach of confidentiality. But, I would be remiss if I did not share with you a matter of such personal significance." He paused. "I wanted you to know."

"This is incredible news," she said, her face lighting up and she allowed herself to show the excitement she felt inside. "So what does this mean?" she asked.

"It means that I will be given release time from my duties at the university. Additionally, at some point in the near future, I will have to travel—likely more than once—to the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland to fulfill my commitments to the project."

She nodded. It would require some sacrifice, but they would cross that bridge when they got to it.

"Also," he added. "I will receive a partial salary from a federal grant."

Amy thought a moment. "So... more money?"

He nodded. "Quite a bit more—a fact which will have a significance for your personal ambitions as well."

Amy thought a moment, then sunk after realizing what he meant.

"Sheldon, while I am glad this is happening for you... I have to get back to work. For me it's not about the money. It's about—"

"No," Sheldon interrupted. "I mean that we can buy that house."

Amy felt quite like she would burst out of her skin. She hugged him tightly. He hugged her back.

"Sheldon!" she said, her head against his chest, "it's like, for the first time in a very long time, things are starting to go our way." She could feel him nodding above her head. For some reason, her confidence began to falter. She pulled away, looking up at him. "How do you know that... this is the one?"

He reflected a moment before answering. "Because every now and then a project comes along that
is…” He stopped, turning away a little awestruck. And that was her answer. She reached up, pulling his face towards hers and got on her tip-toe, kissing him on the lips. She started to drop back down, but he placed his hand behind her back, holding her there and prolonging the moment.

They pulled away, looking at each other for a moment. He turned his head towards the door.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"Asleep. They really missed you."

Sheldon didn't respond but, still, she knew; he had missed them, too.

"And how was your interview?" Sheldon asked. He looked down at her with hopeful eyes. In moments like this, his unflagging confidence in her felt more like pressure.

"It went well," Amy said, with all the cheer she could muster. Sheldon nodded.

"Good," he said. He smiled once more and opened the door. She exited, then he did, before they joined the gang outside.

Howard, rather dramatically, looked at his watch. "And there we have it folks," he announced. "Five minutes flat. I believe, Dr. Cooper, you have redefined the term 'quick shooter'."

"Really?" Bernadette said, with a mocking look, "Because I thought you did that."

"Gosh, Bernie, not in public," Howard whined.

"You know what?" Sheldon began, not the least bit amused. "What's a man have to do to do to earn some respect in his own home?" he asked.

"Well, I'm just saying that—" Howard answered, but before he could finish, Sheldon, in a dazzling show of agility and finesse, scooped up Amy with one arm, dipped her down in front of him, and bestowed her with hair-raising, lip-tingling, thrilling kiss. Then, in a single motion, she was back on her feet, if not a little dizzy and flushed.

All in attendance looked on, slack-jawed and stunned.

"Now get out," he said. And they all scrambled to do just that.

Dr. Siebert was standing at the head of the conference table and a woman stood by his side. She was a tall, poised, no more than five years away from her PhD and dressed far too well to dwell among the motley band of scientists that paced the halls of CalTech. What was most distinct about her, however, was what she wasn't wearing: a smile. Sheldon recognized the woman immediately.

She was Dr. Lise-Marie Zurbriggen.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Sloppy Joes and celery sticks--yummo!

Sheldon was typing and was interrupted by a notification on his screen. It was time for the first official meeting of the new project. Such meetings would be infrequent, as they drew attention to the project. That day, the room had been reserved under the title of "Education Initiative," but it would be anything but.

Dr. Seibert was presiding. He kept it brief and to the point (like Sheldon liked) and, as promised, finished in time for lunch. It was five till noon when he made his final remarks.

"We look forward to the coming months with high hopes for this pursuit, and trust that all of you will do your utmost to make this a rewarding and ground-breaking experience." he said. He then turned to the woman just to his left. "On that note, I would like to make an introduction. Please meet Dr. Lise-Mare Zurbriggen, a staff scientist with the Large Hadron Collider as well as that institution's representative on this project. I assume that many of you are familiar with her, and those who aren't will get an opportunity to do so in coming days and weeks. So, in conclusion, hopefully this first meeting will get the research team off to a fine start." He turned to Lise-Marie. "Is there's anything else…?"

She shook her head, and he turned back to the group.

"Then… you are dismissed."

Everyone stood and left the room, as did Sheldon, and he made his way to the cafeteria.

There was quite possibly nothing that he enjoyed more than a challenging question that demanded an eloquent answer. He was practically giddy to be embarking on what would no doubt be the most rewarding endeavor of his life and the vehicle for his scientific immortality. Not even to mention the perks: a brand-spanking new computer with all the RAM, memory and software that a theoretical physicist of his caliber could ever want, promises of working at the LHC, a willing staff of scientists under his direction, and…

The Nobel Prize on the horizon.

Lost in nerdy reverie, he found himself standing in the cafeteria line and he looked down at the day's offering: Sloppy Joe with celery sticks. It was an odd combination, but he was too jolly to complain. By the time he reached the lunch table, the guys' lunchtime conversation was well underway. Howard was talking.

"So, in hindsight, I realize I got the tones wrong, and accidentally said, 'hop on the abdomen of your grandmother.' So Joel walked over to where my mom was napping on the couch and begin to jump and down on her stomach. Of course, she has entirely too much belly fat for any really damage to her organs to have occurred, but let's just say now he knows more Yiddish curse words than English."
Raj started giggling. "Almost as many curse words as Adam knows in Mathari." He erupted in laughter.

"I told you to stop doing that," Howard said, annoyed.

"I'm sorry," Raj said, wiping the tears from his eyes, "but it is so funny to hear such filth coming from a two-year-old with such angelic eyes."

"Yeah well, thanks to you, some Indians looks at us funny in the grocery store, and I'm sure it's because he's probably lighting up their ears with some colorful language."

"And not because one of their kind is being raised by a white devil?"

"Well, they give us their kids we give them McDonald's. Fair trade."

"So racist," Raj said, his face looking hurt.

"Oh, don't give me that," Howard said, about to start into a rant, but just then, Sheldon sat down at the table. He looked… weirder than usual.

"What are you grinning about?" Leonard said.

"Who's grinning? I'm not grinning," Sheldon said. He was grinning.

Raj looked at him sideways. "You are definitely grinning, dude. It's creepy."

"I am just happy that, um," he looked down and his Styrofoam plate, "I'm happy that we are having Sloppy Joe's again, that's all."

Howard looked up. "But I thought you said Sloppy Joes were disgusting and nearly impossible to eat without looking like you were raised in a barn."

"Nonsense," Sheldon said, manually approaching the combination of bread overrun with tomato-flavored red meat with feigned delight. "Sloppy Joes are yummo." Finally managing to wrap his fingers around the soggy buns, he lifted the sandwich up, only for a giant glop to fall onto his lap. He took a small bite (still grinning). "See? Yummo."

While everyone looked at him with quizzical expressions, something caught Leonard's eye. He nodded his head to the right. "She's been popping up all over campus." The other three men turned in the direction he was looking. It was Lise-Marie along with Dr. Siebert, slipping behind the doors of the VIP seating area.

"Who is she?" Howard asked.


"Who knows," Sheldon answered defensively, and rapidly. "She could be here for any reason. She's a physicist. We do physics here. She could do physics here. It makes total sense. It's not odd at all."

"Who cares why she's here, as long as she's here," Raj said. "She's the most beautiful thing to come out of the Large Hadron Collider. If physicists ran Maxim, she'd be at the top of the Hot 100 every year."

"I dunno," Leonard said, poking at his celery sticks, "she has a reputation for being a very, well, not nice, difficult, not nice, mean, kind of, well, not nice—"
"A bitch?" Howard asked.

"Well, I wasn't going to say it," Leonard replied.

"It's not true," Raj said. "Any women who works twice as hard as a man does—in heels—gets
tagged with offensive names. But, as Madonna once said, 'Sometimes you have to be a bitch to get
things done.'" He sighed. "Those are truly words to live by."

"Dr. Zurbriggene seems delightful to me," Sheldon said casually while scrubbing at the stain on his
lap. All heads snapped to him.

"You've met her?" Leonard said. Sheldon looked up, stunned.

"No. Of course not."

Leonard looked at his other tablemates, then back at Sheldon. "Then how do you know if she's
delightful or not?"

"Because she must be delightful. She's from Switzerland. Everyone knows the Swiss are delightful,
Leonard. You didn't know that, Leonard?" The frantic statements were accompanied by full-on
face spasms.

Leonard just stared at Sheldon, his mind overrun with questions.

"Ugh," Howard groaned while staring at his phone. "Joel apparently pulled all the toilet paper off
the roll in the bathroom and threw it all over the house and, of course, it was the last roll. With my
mother's hostile relationship with her digestive system, this basically amounts to an emergency."
He stood. "I'm going to have to run and get some more paper and take it back to the house."

"I'm leaving, too," Sheldon said, rising with his plate in hand.

"But what about your lunch?" Raj asked.

Sheldon looked down at the goopy mess of food with disdain. "Sloppy Joes are disgusting," he
said, and marched away.

The twins, true to form, made a habit of sharing everything: toys, snacks, secrets and the
occasional T-shirt or two. For the past few weeks, however, they had been sharing the same cold.
As soon as one would be on the mend, the other would descend into the depths of respiratory
distress. The symphony of sneezes had reached its crescendo this particular night, and in lieu of
dinner and a planned dip in the tub, Amy spent her evening wiping snotty noses, reminding them to
cover their noses and rubbing Vick's Vapo-Rub on tiny chests. She had expected Sheldon to show
up any minute with a serenade of Soft Kitty, but by the time they fell asleep around 8, he had failed
to make an appearance. Tired, and likely coming down with a cold herself, she headed to the
bedroom and found him typing away.

"Hello, stranger," she said.

He tried to look up, and his head rose while his eyes remained fixed on the screen. She moved
towards the dresser to change into her night clothes.

"The kids really could have used a little 'purr, purr, purr' tonight," she said.

"Uh huh," he said, his gaze uninterrupted.
"What you working on?" she asked.

"The… um… um…" he replied. He kept working.

"The 'um, um?'" she repeated. He finally turned to her.

"I can't speak of exactly what I'm working on," he said. He turned back to the screen.

She nodded with understanding. "Oh, right. Of course, of course."

"And I would prefer that you not try to get it out of me," he added.

"I had no intentions to," she said, and moved towards the bed.

"Because I will tell you absolutely nothing," he continued.

"I know you wouldn't," she said and crawled beneath the covers.

"My lips of sealed," he said.

"As they should be."

He sighed, his shoulders drooping. "Oh, but if you if you must know," he said.

"I… don't, actually," Amy said.

"I am quite nearly over the moon with this endeavor."

"Well that's good news," she said.

"The work environment is ideal."

"Good."

"The challenge is suitable to my need for a demanding research topic."

"Great."

"I have a renewed confidence in my abilities."

"Naturally."

"And I'm earning a wage comparable to my talents."

"Well-deserved," she said.

"Although today we were introduced to a representative from the LHC today. I'm a bit intrigued as to the exact nature of her role in the project."

"I wonder what it could be," Amy said.

"Amy, I can't answer any questions," he said.

"I… haven't asked any," she said.

Sheldon turned to her. "Oh," he said. "Well, then I've surely said too much."
Amy found that unlikely. He resumed typing.

"In other news," she said. She pulled closer to him, until she was hovering near his shoulder. "I have another interview coming up."

"Uh huh."

"With Pasadena Central University."

"Uh huh."

"Are you listening to me?"

He turned to her. "Why would you want to work there? Their Biology Department is an afterthought."

"It's something, Sheldon," she said. She turned her head down, looking at her fidgeting hands. "I don't want to... miss any opportunities, no matter how small." She looked back up at him. "I need to be realistic."

His only reply was more typing. Amy sighed.

"You know how much I hate it when you work in bed," she said. She expected him to mention his silent keyboard or beg for another half hour. He didn't.

"I'll take it out in the living room," he said, and rose with his laptop in hand.

Amy watched him, surprised, as he walked to the door. She relented a little. "Or you could just stay here and finish up whatever it is your working on," she said. "But only a half hour more."

He shrugged. "No, get your rest," he said. "I'll be back later." With that, he walked out of the door, shutting it behind him.

Amy stared at the door a long while, not sure what to make of what had just happened. She finally determined not to turn it into something more than it was; his workload had surely increased, and of course he would have to put in a long night every once in a while—especially in the beginning. After taking a deep breath, she returned to her side of the bed, turned out the light, put her head to the pillow, and tried to get some sleep.

The following day, Lise Marie called a meeting. When Sheldon arrived, Dr. Frank Haskins (the experimental lead) and himself were the only ones in attendance.

"Hello Dr. Cooper, Dr. Haskins," she said in salutation. She had an accent, frothy and light, that suggested she came from the French-speaking region of Switzerland. "As Dr. Siebert said yesterday, I am Lise-Marie Zurbriggen, but you can call me Lise-Marie. I assume we will all be operating on a first name basis?"

Dr. Haskins nodded amiably. "Absolutely," he said. "Frank is fine."

Sheldon, however, said nothing.

"And Dr. Cooper, you are not opposed?"

"Well, I suppose I am not opposed in the strictest sense of the term, but—"
"Excellent," she said. "Then, Frank and Sheldon, let's get started. I will be here on the campus for the duration of the project as the Operational Office and Supervisor. I look forward to working with you."

"I'm sorry," Sheldon said, a tad concerned. "I am unfamiliar with that particular title. What will be the nature of your duties?"

"I will be managing the project in a general sense, and serve as a liaison between this site and the LHC in Switzerland." She'd also been hired to keep an eye on Sheldon. "So with that said, let's—"

But Sheldon had another comment.

"Interesting. I've been on such projects before and typically the Principal Investigator, in this case Dr. Gablehauser, would be entrusted with those tasks."

Lisa-Marie turned her head to Sheldon and collected herself. She would not be rattled so soon. "Sheldon," she began, "you will find that on a project as unique as this one, there will be many things that will not be 'typical.'"

Sheldon hardly seemed contented with that answer, but didn't press the matter further.

"So, let's introduce ourselves. Frank, would you like to go first."

"Um, sure," Frank said, sitting up a little in his chair. "I got my degree in—"

Sheldon cut in. "Nuclear Physics in 2003 from Michigan State University. You did your post-doctoral fellowship at FermiLab. Your thesis was on nuclear decay."

"Um, yes," Frank said. Sheldon continued.

"You are married to Claire Haskins nee Fairfield and have three children, aged 6, 4 and 2—far too close together in you ask me—and ran a half marathon last year for breast cancer research, in which you came in a rather pathetic 142nd. Honestly, Frank, in those kinds of endeavors, training is imperative."

"I just wanted to finish," Frank said defensively.

"Is that going to be your approach to this project? You just want to finish?"

"How do you even know all that?" Frank said, clearly alarmed.

"I submitted your name as a query to an algorithmic engine for finding an item with specified properties among a collection of items," Sheldon replied, far too calmly.

"So you… googled me?" Frank asked.

"If you want to use that term."

"I do."

"I don't. 'Google,' when used as a verb, is an eponym. Eponyms dilute our language and carry a real risk for copyright violation, thus, I generally avoid using them."

"Eponyms?" Lise-Marie asked.

"Yes, eponyms. For example, referring to all facial tissues as Kleenex, all jeans as Levi's, or all
theoretical physicists as Cooperites."

Franks scoffed at that suggestion. "No one refers to theoretical physicists as Cooperites."

Sheldon turned to him. "But someday they will."

Lise-Marie crossed her arms and a smug smile came across her face. "This would be the side of Sheldon Lee Cooper I’ve heard so much about."

"And what side would that be?" Sheldon asked.

"I’ll try to avoid using an eponym but, even so, I think you might find it a bit unflattering."

An icy breeze passed between them after the statement. Sheldon replied in kind.

"All the greats suffered ridicule and were misunderstood for their genius," he said, brushing imaginary lint off of his shirt. "I am reminded of Michelangelo who, in his day, was largely reputed to be insufferable, melancholy and uncouth only to be vindicated after his death as one of the greatest masters of all time."

Arms still crossed, Lise-Marie advanced forward until she was right above him. "Well I am reminded of Pierre DeGuerre, a biologist bestowed with a promising career and undeniable genius that both were derailed before they scarcely began because of his haughtiness and inflexibility. His nascent contributions were lost to the annals of time."

"Pierre who?" Sheldon asked, looking up.

"My point exactly," she replied.

Sheldon squinted, his face marked with doubt. "I don't believe this Pierre character actually exists."

"And there's no way for you to find out, is there?"

Sheldon was annoyed. "That bit of fiction and only serves to confirm the absolute lack of confidence I have in your supervisory capacities. How can we build an environment of discovery and scholarship on a foundation of trickery and manipulation?"

"You, Dr. Cooper, show a remarkable lack of understanding in the nuances of leading your colleagues."

"I think you'll be shocked to find," Sheldon retorted, his voice rising and growing more high-pitched with each syllable, "that our colleagues will be more than happy to follow a true man of science rather than an imported bureaucrat."

She leaned a hand against the table, lowering her eyes until they were face to face. "An accusation of no consequence, as my work as a scientist is both indisputable and unimpeachable."

Sheldon turned away, muttering. "I might add to that list 'unremarkable."

"And I might remind you that you are a condescending, self-assured, pompous jerk." She spun around with she said it, her back to him.

"This, coming from a woman whose name has oft been associated with females of the canine variety."

She turned back around, slamming a hand on the table. "Surely you did not just refer to me as a
'bitch?"

Sheldon looked at her with complete shock. "Of course not. I am merely reporting the findings of one of my colleagues. You'll find I am loath to use profanity in—"

But she had heard enough. She drew closer to him, leading with her index finger.

"Dr. Cooper, such language is both sexist and unprofessional and I assure you that I meet such behavior with zero tolerance."

Sheldon stood at this. "Well if you find working with me so 'intolerable,' perhaps you should leave the project."

"Never," she replied. "It is you that sees me as incompetent. Perhaps your expertise could be better used... elsewhere."


"Then we have arrived at one can only call an impasse."

"Fine," Sheldon said, exuding false calm. "There is only one option left."

She took a deep breath, calming some and bringing her arms to her side. "That we find a way to get along?"

"Heavens no," Sheldon replied with a snort. "I hereby move for a vote of 'no confidence' and for the immediate dismissal of Dr. Zurbriggen. All in favor raise their hands." He raised his hand. Then they both looked at Frank.

"Yeeeah," Frank said. "I have another meeting after this. I'll just... leave now." He picked up his papers and promptly did just that.

Sheldon and Lise-Marie looked at each other, locking eyes in a stubborn battle of wills.

"I'll be leaving as well," she said finally. She grabbed her folder, and marched for the door. At the threshold, she paused without turning around, speaking over her shoulder. "Do not think you actions will intimidate me, Sheldon. I am made of sterner stuff." With that, she left.

Sheldon slumped back in his chair, a pout on his face. "I hate playing with other kids," he said, gathering up his own papers.

Sheldon burst through the door as Amy sat at the table, tinkering with her curriculum vitae and other paperwork she would have to bring to her interview.

"I am finding it all but impossible to complete my duties while working with a woman who insists on acting as if she's my de facto babysitter," he announced, and placed his messenger bag on the couch.

His mood had changed considerably since the night before. Unfortunately, it wasn't much information.

"I am completely baffled as to why I would need supervising," he continued. "The very notion is absurd."

"Who's supervising you," Amy asked.
"I absolutely cannot answer any questions," he said.

"Then you leave me with little choice other than to change the subject. Namely—"

"Although," Sheldon interrupted, "a well worded statement of doubt may prompt me to reveal the matter that I find so disquieting."

"Let's see," Amy said, thinking aloud. "I can't imagine why you are so—" That's all he needed.

"I was chosen for this position for my ability to work independently, for my deductive prowess and for my outstanding reputation in the wider scientific community. And yet, now I must answer to a surly nurse-maid?"

"Oh dear," Amy said in commiseration.

"I refuse to be corralled into submission like a cow on the pasture waiting to be slaughtered."

"That analogy might be a bit excessive."

He plopped down at the table. "I'm not happy, Amy," he said.

"I've discerned that. And worse, preparations for my impending job interview and the kid's testing for kindergarten have meant that the time has gotten away from me. I thought we might order delivery tonight."

"Only one of those things are in doubt," he said. "Your interview will no doubt go swimmingly; the twins' performance on their kindergarten testing will be exceptional. Dinner however, is in serious danger of being a disappointing affair."

"Let's do Thai," Amy said. "I have a coupon."

Sheldon patted the table in a celebratory gesture. "Three for three, Amy," he said. "Well done."

"I do try," she said with a coy smile.

Sheldon was sitting at his desk doing the grunt work that he didn't trust his graduate students to do, and working to get one of their monstrous equations down to a manageable and eloquent expression. The one plus to his day was that he hadn't run into Lise Marie. Just when he was up to his knees in coefficients, Gablehauser burst into his office.

"It is customary to notify the secretary before meeting with faculty," Sheldon said, "although I would have settled for a knock on the door."

Gablehauser slammed a piece of paper on his desk. "Read this."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Needy baby, greedy baby, indeed.

Dr. Gablehauser had stormed Sheldon's office, slammed a sheet of paper on his desk, and demanded that Sheldon read it. Completely unruffled, however, Sheldon turned his head, perusing the four line missive, and then returned to his work.

"Comments?" Dr. Gablehauser demanded.

"I'm sorry, were you expecting a reply?" Sheldon said.

"Your squabbles with our visiting professor have made it all the way up to the President's Office in less than 24 hours, causing me to receive this nasty email."

"That's because I left him notice of our squabbles in his suggestion box, suggesting that she be replaced with someone more competent as soon as possible. In all honesty, I'm heartened to see that he actually reads the suggestions. I'm still waiting for feedback on my idea of an ice cream bar in the faculty caf."

Gablehauser stood up erect, and straightened his tie. "I'm only going to say this once, Dr. Cooper." His tone arrested Sheldon's attention and he turned his head. "You will find a way to get along with Dr. Zurbriggen, you will do so immediately and you will not contact Dr. Siebert with any more ideas, complaints or suggestions. Am I understood?"

Sheldon shrugged dismissively. "I have an IQ of 187. 'Understanding' is rarely the prob—"

"SHELDON!" he yelled.

Sheldon bristled at Dr. Gablehauser's volume, wincing. "I understand," he said.

"And you will comply?" his boss continued.

Sheldon sighed. "And I will comply."

"Good," he said, composing himself. He turned on his heels, and left.

Leonard was in the lobby of the mechanic's shop, waiting for them to perform the oil change on his car, when he got a call from a number he didn't recognize. He did, however, recognize that the area code was from New Jersey, and since he had recently ordered another copy of his birth certificate, he guessed the call was related to that.

"Leonard Hofstadter," he answered.

"Hello, Leonard," came a severe, feminine voice from the other side. "This is your mother."

Leonard gasped, panic running through his veins.
"Don't say it," he pleaded. "Dad had another heart attack. I knew he shouldn't have taken that trip to Six Flags. Mother, you should really talk to him; that girl he's dating is too young."

"Your father is fine," she said. "Physically, at least."

Leonard sat back, surprised. "And... you're okay?"

"Of course, Leonard," she said, with some annoyance.

"And Michael is—"

"Everyone is fine," Beverly said, cutting him off. "The purpose of my call is not to bear bad news."

Leonard pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it in disbelief.

"Although," Beverly said, "a glance at the calendar has made me realize that your wife will soon be entering her eighth month of pregnancy, a period characterized by increased foot and back pain, severe mood swings, and virtually no libido. You should be prepared, Leonard."

"That's why you called?"

"No. I called because," she paused, presumably collecting herself. Or weighing her words. Or sharpening a cutting barb. Leonard's panic started to return. "I called because in the course of my work I accidentally stumbled upon a most charming bassinet and ordered it for you. Please notify me when you receive it in the mail."

"You bought us a bassinet?"

"No, I bought your unborn child a bassinet, Leonard. You have the curious habit of re-appropriating statements to yourself."

"Thank you, Mother," he said, his mind still on the gift. But she had more news.

"I would also like to inform you that I will be in town for the birth. I've already made arrangements for my stay at the Pasadena Marriott. I've hired a car to pick me up from the airport."


"And sleep on the couch? I'd never be so reckless with my lumbar region," she said.

"It's very comfy," Leonard said. "I've spent a night or two on it myself." Then he thought about how that sounded. "Back before I was married, of course. You know, back when Penny and I were just good, good friends with no romantic attachment."

"I'll pretend to believe that, dear, if that is what you need from me." He could almost hear her shaking her head. "Greedy baby, needy baby," she muttered.

Something dawned on Leonard. "When would your work have made you come across a bassinet?"

"Bassinets are everywhere, Leonard. The details are unimportant," she said hurriedly. "And frankly, I must go. I have important business to attend to. I just want to say in closing," she paused. "I'm rather looking forward to meeting this grandchild, Leonard."

Leonard didn't respond; he was waiting for her to complete her statement. "But what?"
"But nothing," she said. "Parenthood is one of the great challenges of life and brings with it a fresh perspective on one's own parents. It makes for a potentially exciting time and, I'm glad to see you've taken it on without your characteristic pessimism and underachievement. I'm… proud of you, Leonard."

Leonard was stunned. It took him a moment to formulate a coherent thought. "You really mean it?"

"Oh, son," she sighed. "Your pleas for affirmation are tiresome."

"Then… thank you," he said, but clearly getting emotional. "All I've ever wanted, Mother, is to make you proud. It's just that—"

"I really must go, Leonard," she said, and hung up.

Leonard sat smiling when his name was called.

"Lenny?" the mechanic called. Leonard rose.

"I go by Leonard," he clarified.

"Yeah, whatever," the man said, plowing on. "You're a doctor, right?"

Leonard shrugged. "A PhD."

"Good enough. We did the oil change, but we figure you need spark plugs, rear shocks, brake pads, all new tires…"

Leonard snatched the clipboard from the man and signed. "Just do the work. You're hashing my buzz," he said, still smiling.

"Will do, Lenny," the man said. "Will do." Leonard thought he heard the man whisper 'ka-ching' as we walked away.

It was a little after eight, and Howard crept into the bedroom, gingerly closing the door behind him.

"The kids are asleep," he said, "the fish are fed, and mom is properly drugged and snoring, which means I have nothing to do but mercilessly ravish the little blonde that's lying in my bed." Bernadette turned to him, tiredness in her eyes.

"Aww, Howie," she whined, "It sounds nice, but… I'm a little sleepy myself."

Howard couldn't hide his disappointment. "Really?"

She threw back the covers to reveal she was wearing a red, skimpy, negligee.

"Wake me up," she purred.

"Will do," Howard said, giddy, and scurried towards the bed. Just as he was in the throes of covering his wife's neck with kisses, they heard:

"HOW-ARD!"

It was Mrs. Wolowitz, calling through the wall from her mother-in-law suite. Bernadette sighed with frustration, but Howard was not so dismayed.
"Ignore it and it'll go away," he said, and turned his attention back to Bernadette's collarbone.

"HOWARD! I NEED HELP!" came another cry through the wall.

The amorous couple didn't miss a beat.

"HOWARD, I'VE FALLEN IN THE BATHROOM!"

He slowed a bit. "An oldie but goodie," he whispered. "It could be nothing." Then she let out a blood-curdling scream.

"HOWARD! I THINK I BROKE MY BACK!"

"Okay, that's new," he said. He hopped off the bed and started to put on his clothes. Bernadette was clearly upset.

"Howard," she whispered loudly, "are you sure she's not just lying? She's always having some crisis."

"I better not take a chance with one," he said, putting on his pants. "Her voice is in the same register as your average body builder. Only very real pain can make her squeal that high pitched." He pulled up his pants. "I'M COMING, MA!" he yelled through the wall.

"COME AS FAST AS YOU CAN!" she yelled back. "AND BRING MY FLORAL BRA OUT OF THE DRYER."

"I'M NOT BRINGING YOU YOUR FLORAL BRA OUT OF THE DRYER, MA!" he said.

"BUT THE BRA I HAVE ON DOESN'T MATCH MY PANTIES AND WOULDN'T THAT BE EMBARRASSING."

"THEY WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE YOUR PANTIES UNDER ALL THE FAT!"

Bernadette was still agitated. "Why can't you just call an ambulance?" she asked.

Howard liked the idea. "You're right, Bernie; I'd probably sprain every muscle in my body trying to get her off that floor alone. I'm gonna have to call for backup." He reached for his phone and smiled back at Bernadette. "Thanks!"

She smiled back, then reached out a hand to him. He drew closer, taking it. "Then you can stay here with me," she said.

"But, even with the ambulance," he explained, "I still have to go with her."

"Why? You can't do anything the EMTs can't," she said.

"Yeah, but I'm not letting her go alone; it'll be better if I'm around to make sure everything goes okay. Besides, I'm the only one who can touch up her eyebrows if they get messed up en route." He sat down on the bed. "Look, they'll probably just give her some steroids and I'll be back in a couple hours. Okay?"

"But what about the kids?" she whispered, and there was twinge of fear in her voice.

Howard made his way to the bedroom door. "They're asleep," he said. He gave her a little wave. "Goodnight." When he opened the door, Adam and Joel were both standing there looking up at Howard with worried eyes. Adam walked forward and leaned against Howard's leg. "Awww. 
They must have woken up from all the yelling," he said, unable to hide how cute he found the whole thing. He picked up Adam and took Joel's hand, walking them both over to Bernadette. Meanwhile, she scrambled to slip an oversized T-shirt over her head.

"Howard!" she said alarmed. "I can't sleep with them in the bed."

"Sure you can," Howard said. "I used to sleep in the bed with my mom all the time right after my dad first left. I remember falling asleep to the sound of my mother's voice as she told me stories about all the sluts that had ruined her marriage." He sighed. "Good memories." He looked at the three of them on the bed. "Here," he said, and motioned for Bernadette to get in the middle; after a moment of hesitation, she did. Then he picked up Joel and put him on her left, then placed Adam on her right. Gently, he lifted the comforter and tucked them all in, and then he kissed Bernadette on the forehead. He parted his lips to say 'goodbye,' when…

"HURRY UP, HOWARD! I'M DYING OVER HERE!" Mrs. Wolowitz yelled through the wall.

"I'M COMING AS FAST AS I CAN, OLD LADY!" Howard yelled back. He turned towards his family. "I'll be back," he said in a horrible Terminator accent, and left.

Then there was just the three of them. Adam looked up at Bernadette.

"Sleep?" he asked.

"Yes, sleep," she said firmly.

"Sleep?" Joel said. His language skills weren't as strong as Adam's, and he tended to repeat whatever his brother said.

"Yes, sleep," she repeated, "It's time to go to sleep."

Both boys seemed to understand, and snuggled in closer. No doubt exhausted, they quickly fell asleep.

But Bernadette couldn't. As the minutes ticked by at a glacier pace, she finally sat up, careful not to wake the boys, and looked at the clock.

Only twelve minutes had gone by.

Dropping back down to the bed, she covered her eyes with both hands and could feel hot tears running down her cheeks.

"You know," Penny said on her way back from the kitchen, "we haven't talked about names again since you came back from your trip." She sat a beer down on the coffee table in front of her husband, and carried a glass of sparkling white grape juice for herself, mentally pretending it was a glass of peach schnapps.

"Yeah, I know," Leonard said. He slid over to make room for her on the couch, and she sat down. "But I have been giving it a lot of thought."

Penny was pleasantly surprised. "You have?"

He nodded. "I've been thinking, and I'm starting to warm to the name… Beverly."

Penny erupted in laughter, swatting at Leonard's shoulder, and then laid her head back on the couch, her eyes closed. "You are so hilarious, Leonard. That's the thing I love about you most."
Your sense of humor." She placed a hand on his lap, then suddenly sat back up. "Oops, I forgot: did you want a lemon wedge in your Corona?" When her eyes met his, she realized he wasn't laughing.

"I'm serious," he said, maybe a bit defensively. "I really do like the name Beverly."

Penny leveled a look of disbelief at him. "Seriously, sweetie? Beverly? As in Beverly Hofstadter?"

Leonard fidgeted with the label on his beer. "Well, I think 'Beverly' is beautiful, but yes, it also happens to be my mother's name."

"Um," she began, her bewilderment continuing, "besides the fact that no one under the age of 60 should carry around the name Beverly, where is this sudden 'mommy love' coming from?"

"I've always loved my mom," Leonard said.

"Oh my God; not this again," Penny said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh not what again?" Leonard said.

"You always do this. You see some Hallmark commercial or watch Forrest Gump and suddenly you just love your mom so much. Then you reach out to her, she crushes you and I have to sit around and pick up the emotional pieces."

Leonard laughed mockingly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You don't? So last year for Mother's Day you don't remember how your mom pitted you and your siblings against each other in a gift war?"

"I wouldn't call it a gift war," Leonard muttered.

"And who won?" Penny demanded.

"My brother. He's a lawyer so, of course, he could afford to get her the Maserati. I mean, I could have afforded it," Leonard muttered. "I just would have had to refinance a couple things."

"WRONG!" Penny said. "She won. She made out like a bandit while you all were left with psychological control and guilt. We really couldn't even afford that GPS-enabled, gold plated, emerald encrusted dog collar."

"But Mom really wanted it," Leonard said.

"She doesn't even have a dog!" Penny yelled back. "She just wanted to see how far she could manipulate you!"

Leonard was heating up as well.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry, Penny, for not having the 'perfect family,'" he said, making 'air quotes' with his fingers, "but you know what? Your family isn't exactly Camelot, but you don't see me complaining."

"That's because my dad loves you," she replied.

Leonard shrugged. "Well... good."

"Right, and your mom treats me like an idiot and insults me every chance she gets. So that's the
"My mom does not think you're an idiot. In fact, she is rather fond of you. I've never seen her offer someone free counseling to work through their 'daddy issues.'"

"Leonard," Penny said, growing frustrated. "I don't have 'daddy issues,' okay? And even if I did, if that's her way of showing she's 'fond' of me, she can keep it." She stood up and walked to the kitchen, dumping out her drink and heading to the bedroom. "I'm going to bed."

"Hold on," Leonard called after her. "I'm not done."

Penny stopped and turned around with some annoyance. "What is it?"

"Look, my mom may not be perfect, but I don't hate her, Penny."

"I'm not saying you do," Penny said, walking back towards the couch. "I'm just saying that why would you want to name our newborn daughter after your mom, when she's done nothing but make our lives so difficult."

"Maybe because, now that I'm becoming a parent, I'm starting to appreciate the sacrifices she made for my sister, my brother, and me. You know, it couldn't have been easy all those years belittling our artwork or pushing away our hugs just to make sure we were better artists and needy sexual partners."

Penny sighed and then sat on the back of the couch. "Look, I understand wanting to have a closer relationship with your mother. My own mother is M.I.A. half the time and has always lived for herself. But naming our daughter after Beverly is not the way to do that. Invite her over for brunch… or to a witch's convention."

Leonard wasn't budging. "Penny I feel really strongly about this. And I'm not backing down just because you see this as a power struggle."

The statement pushed Penny to her feet. "A power struggle? Are you kidding me?"

"You heard me," Leonard shot back.

"If this were a power struggle, I would've already won," she shouted back.

"Oh, that's right," Leonard said. "Loser Leonard should just be glad you even keep him around. Maybe I should get another one of those dog collars so you can put it around my neck."

"You're out of your mind!" Penny said and marched off to the bedroom.

"Am I? Am I?" Leonard said, storming off behind her, "Well at least I have a mother that can give me therapy!" he said.

"Oh, shove it," Penny said, slamming the bedroom door in his face. Leonard grabbed the door handle, but it was locked.

"Penny, let me in," he said, banging on the door.

"NO!" she screamed.

"I'm serious," he said. "I'll tear this thing off the hinges."

"Since you love therapy so much, go lie down on the couch," she yelled through the door.
Leonard grabbed the door handle and yanked it a few times. It didn't budge. Then he started jiggling it frantically several times before giving up. He gave it one more futile kick, then skulked over to the couch and lay down.

"You know I could have got in there if I wanted to," he called over his shoulder, but there wasn't any answer. With a frustrated sigh, he took one final swig of his beer, cut out the light and went to sleep.

Sheldon's whole agitation at what he was now referring to as "Zurbriggen-gate" left Amy with the nagging suspicion that she wasn't going to get any rest.

"Sheldon," she began, while taking the last plate from his hand and rinsing it for him. "Washing" the dishes had gone like that all night: he would pick up a plate and then just stare at it as he ranted about how victimized he was to be forced to work with "an incorrigible bureaucrat masquerading as a scientist;" she would eventually take the plate from his hand and just clean it herself. In the end, Amy had pretty much washed the dishes alone. "This project is not something you have to do. It's not like we've moved yet. If being a part of it is going to take away your peace of mind, recuse yourself, return to your previous position and I'll get a good night rest without you tossing and turning all night."

"But what about the house?" he said.

She placed a sudsy hand on his arm before realizing it. He regarded the gesture with some displeasure. "I love that house,"—she seriously, dearly, truly loved that house—"but not at all costs." She reached up and gave him a quick kiss. "I love you more."

Sheldon stood looking down at her with a facial expression that was fading into something more tranquil and calm, but he suddenly reverted back to its previous agitation. He started shaking his head as he wiped his hands on the towel that was hanging from oven door handle.

"Nope," he said, walking towards the couch. "It's not just about the house. I must stay on this project. She will not best me. She will not take from me what is mine."

Amy squinted a little, thinking, as she followed him into the living room. "You're referring to the Prize?" she asked, taking a seat beside him on the couch.

"Naturally," he said. "I've waited too long and, as my mother would say, 'it's my season.'"

"Your mother would typically be talking about blessings from God."

"The point is," he said, plowing over the statement, "this goal is in my reach. And I will not permit some Swiss Miss to wrestle it from my hands."

"You know how I feel about that particular insult," she said, rubbing the back of her head.

Sheldon nodded. "My apologies, although outside of our little microcosm, I don't believe that is an insult at all."

"Nonetheless, I'll ask you to refrain from using it."

"Will do," Sheldon said. Then he took a sip of water and seemed to get lost in thought.

As she watched him, a question came to her mind. The last five years notwithstanding, Amy had been no slouch in the scientific ambition department. She understood the deep-seated drive that
moved scientists to ever-greater challenges and aspirations. Yet, she couldn't help but wonder what motivated Sheldon's singular desire to not rest until he had won the biggest of them all, and it had never occurred to ask until now.

"When did you first set out to get the Nobel Prize?" Amy asked.

"When I was little boy, nine years old," he said immediately.

That was a surprising answer. "So young?" she asked.

He nodded. "I remember having a truly horrific day. One that stood out among the throngs of bad days I had the ignominy of experiencing as a child. It was nearly farcical in its misery. I had gone to school and been assaulted once again by Archie Cerullo, a brute who took sadistic pleasure in making my life an unadulterated hell. This day, however, he and one of his friends had cornered me in the stairwell and left me with no lunch money, a bruised ego and a swollen ankle. Worse, I believe the incident contributed to me receiving the only 'C' I ever got in my entire scholastic career"—this was shocking news to Amy—"a quiz on some frivolous children's book that was all about feelings; the point of that book remains a complete mystery to me. After school, I walked home, in the rain (as it was the rainy hurricane season in East Texas), only to discover that I had misplaced my key to the trailer. My father was… God only knows where, and my mother wasn't home from work yet, but I knew Missy was at her secret boyfriend's house. I walked over to his trailer, banging on his bedroom window, but they refused to open the door. After a while, she opened the window and yelled, 'Get lost, Shelly,' a command I would have normally been more than happy to comply with if I weren't ankle deep in red-clay mud. By the time I had gotten back to our trailer, my mother and father had beaten me there and wasted no time in beginning their nightly uproar of earsplitting arguing. My father was drunk again, and my mother was sobbing. By then, the rain had calmed some, and instead of going inside, I just sat on the cold wet porch and opened up my only comfort: a Batman comic book. But, even his fantastical stories of heroism and daring, which were usually a suitable escape for whatever troubles ailed me, failed to provide me with any respite whatsoever."

He stopped. Amy found the story interesting (and a bit heartbreaking), but failed to see its relation to the topic at hand.

"And that's why you want to win the Nobel Prize?"

Sheldon nodded.

Amy was still confused. "Did you find out about it that day?"

He shook his head. "I'd long known about the Prize. It was just,"—he turned away from her with a determined gaze, and it was if he were reliving the moment, looking off into the distance, a distance beyond the walls of the apartment—"in that moment, the fighting, and he mud, and the swollen ankle, and the trailer park and all of Galveston disappeared and instead of sitting on a cold, wet porch, nursing my wounds and fantasizing about a caped crusader in Gotham City, I entertained fantasies of a man in Stockholm, decked out in a regal tuxedo, climbing the stairs to a platform to enthusiastic applause. And suddenly, I realized that… that man was me." He turned to Amy. "I could be my own hero, Amy. I could be a scientist. The best scientist. I promised my nine-year-old self that one day I would do that for myself."

Amy had never heard that before… ever. The story felt so intimate, and he looked so tender and vulnerable, that she almost felt like she was meeting him again for the first time.

"I… didn't know that," she said after a while. He finally turned back to her.
"That's because I've never told anyone before," he said. "Not before now."

This additional revelation somehow brought clarity to how she felt about the matter. His goal was far more than the wide-eyed ambition of a cocky scientist. Now, she could see his vision, too. And right then, she decided that she would do everything in her power not to let that nine-year-old boy down.

"I'll help you, Sheldon," she said, whispering. He turned to her. "I promise."

He took her hand and held it tight without saying a word.

Penny was sitting on the floor of Amy's apartment crossed legged (well, as crossed legged as an eight-months-pregnant woman could be) and helping sort through several boxes Amy had pulled from storage. There were cardboard, bubble wrap, foam peanuts and lots of newspaper scattered around them. Lots and lots of newspaper.

"Wow, so you're finally going to get out of 2311 Los Robles," she said blowing dust off a glass. "I was beginning to think this place was like the mafia."

Amy turned her lips to the side, a question on her face. "Structured on a patriarchal hierarchy and extremely violent?"

"Um… no," Penny said. "More like, once you get in you can never get out."

"Ahhh," Amy said, nodding. "That makes more sense."
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

If only Amy had her electrodes now.

After Amy and Sheldon had finally settled on the house they wanted, they immediately set to getting financial backing, and had been happy to have been approved for a loan. Even so, the process of finalizing contract details with the seller, arranging for escrow, waiting on the underwriter, and a million other minutiae meant that the closing date was still a ways off. They were hoping to move in by the end of August, which was still over a month away. In the meantime, Amy was using every spare moment to go through their things and figure out what was coming with them to the new house and what was going to Goodwill.

Thank God for the blonde across the hall.

Penny sighed wistfully, lifting more plates out of a plastic crate. "The first time living in your own house! That must be so exciting."

"It is exciting, though it is not my first time living in my own house," Amy replied. "There was the cute blue cottage on Mulberry Street in Washington, and also our Spanish villa in the valley."

"What?" Penny said, shocked. Just then, Aditi walked out.

"Aditi," Amy said, looking over her shoulder. "You can't keep making excuses to avoid taking your nap. Now go back to your room and lie down."

Aditi shuffled out of the room, her bottom lip hanging so low it was practically dragging on the floor. "I'm not sleepy," she muttered as she went. Amy shook her head, and resumed sorting through juice glasses.

"If she even had an inkling as to how midday rest increases the functioning of the cerebral cortex, she'd be asking for a second nap," she said.

Penny didn't want them to get too far away from their original topic. "Amy, you never said anything about a Spanish villa in the valley."

Amy looked up, surprised. "No? Well, then I'm saying it now. Virgil and I lived in a Spanish villa in the valley."

"Wha—like, how could you even afford it? Those things cost an arm, a leg and your first born child."

Amy paused, a bit taken at Penny's shock. "Well, if you must know, I didn't do too shabby as a research professor at UCLA and Virgil made a brisk buck at the restaurant. We managed well enough."

"Hold on," Penny said, "when you say brisk buck, what are we talking here?"
Amy shrugged. "I don't know. Six figures at least."

Penny gasped. "Six figures at least? How in the hell do you make six figures as a cook?"

"He wasn't a 'cook,' Penny; he was an executive chef and co-owner of an exclusive LA restaurant endorsed by Anthony Bourdain. When people wait in line to pay $37 for a burger and fries, it starts adding up."

"Damn," Penny said. "If someone had told me that at 16, I would have gone to culinary school instead of… well I never actually went to acting school, but still… damn."

"So was it… nice?"

"I'm not a big fan of beef, personally. I much preferred the lamb chops they prepared accompanied by a hearty arugula salad."

"I'm talking about the house," Penny said.

Amy thought a moment, continuing to wrap glasses with newspaper. "Well it was certainly unique if nothing else. While it boasted 2500 square feet, a stone façade, and two kitchens—because Virgil insists that he can't share a kitchen with anyone—it only had one bedroom. If I'm being perfectly honest, it was still too much. We had a Guatemalan lady come in and clean it on Tuesdays." She looked up quizzically. "I think it might have also had an in-ground pool."

"What the hell Amy? You left that guy for Sheldon?"

"No, I left him because… don't you remember this story? You were intricately involved in it."

"I know, I know, it's just…" she searched for the words. "Well, not that I don't think you and Sheldon aren't, like, made for each other in some predestined, parallel-universe, time-bending kind of way, but… what made you finally leave Virgil? I mean, you guys were together for almost three years. That's a long time."

Amy looked away, thinking a moment before she answered. "I wish I could say I left him because he was beginning to fall into the trap of addiction, or because he was a workaholic who was rarely home, or because he would stare at me—slack-jawed with glazed-over eyes—whenever I told him about the things that interested me the most. But, the truth is, Virgil adored me, and I convinced myself that that was enough. Until I wanted children and he didn't. That realization set in motion a period of self-reflection that ended with me deciding that he wasn't the man for me."

It made sense, but there was something still nagging at Penny. "It's just that, well, you had, like, two years of a fantasy life with a successful boyfriend and your freedom and financial stability, and then you just… walked away." She paused. "You don't ever wonder if… well, you never think about going back in time to when things were simpler?" She was asking Amy just as much as she was asking herself. "When things were easier?"

"It wasn't that easy, Penny," Amy said. "Virgil was a workaholic and insisted on living beyond his means. One false move and it all would have collapsed. It likely already has. Besides…" Amy stared off into space, and Penny wondered if she was even going to continue speaking. After a moment, she did. "I'm so glad I walked away. I had no idea then what was waiting for me, but now… I can't imagine life without my twins, without Sheldon. This is the fantasy, Penny. And I'd never dream of living any other way." Amy turned to Penny.

She was crying.

"That is so beautiful," she said with her hand over her mouth and blubbering. She wagged her hand
towards Amy. "Hand me a tissue." Amy passed her the box of Kleenex on the table.

"Oh, if only I had my electrodes now," Amy said, ruefully. "What a delectable cocktail of pregnancy-related oxytocin, emotion-related dopamine and memory-related acetylcholine must be swimming around in that little brain box of yours."

Penny nodded, blew her nose, and cried some more.

Sheldon knocked on Lise-Marie's door, which was open. She looked up from her desk.

"Good morning," she said.

Sheldon glanced up at her and then busied his eyes with the papers in his hands. "This is the contribution of the theoretical division to the inaugural report," he said matter-of-factly. "Please note that there are supplemental pages with charts and images that should appear in the appendix."

She reached out her hand. He advanced into her office, giving her the folder, and then turned to leave without another word. When he was almost at the door, Lise-Marie called out to him.

"Sheldon," she said. He stopped without turning around. "Honestly, Sheldon, can you not even look at me?" she asked.

"Certainly I can," he said. He turned around and looked at her, his countenance blank and sterile. "Is that all?"

"Thank you for bringing me your report."

"I prefer you didn't thank me. While I generally find tree-huggers tedious, I think they would side with me when I say that I could have e-mailed it to you and saved myself a trip… and perhaps the life of a small tree."

"Well then, thank you for complying, regardless of your personal philosophies. I ask for a hard copy as it makes it easy for me to confirm that what I see on screen matches the formatting you intended."

"That's why we should all being using LaTeX to compose our papers instead of Microsoft Word," Sheldon said. "LaTeX is for scientists. Word is for liberal art majors."

"Not all of the staff is inclined to use LaTeX," she said. "It has a steep learning curve and a cumbersome spell checker."

"Then the staff should learn to spell. It really isn't that difficult."

"Sheldon, a key component of leadership is flexibility, don't you think?" she said and she thumbed through the pages of his submission.

"Actually I don't," he replied. "I find that I get much better results by threatening the staff with dismemberment," he said, then corrected himself. "I meant dismissal. Although dismemberment would probably be equally as effective."

She looked up at him with an incredulous glance before stopping on a page and reading with a renewed intensity. Sheldon missed this expression entirely, though, as he was more preoccupied with finding an excuse to leave. He decided he didn't need one.

"If there's nothing else, Lise-Marie," he said, "I'll be going." He turned again to leave.
"Magnificent," she muttered. He turned around.

"What do you find so 'magnificent'?

"This report," she said. "You and your team have done an impressive job of expressing your equations in a succinct manner and correlating them to the models done by the experimentalists. Nicely done."

Far from flattered, Sheldon was clearly agitated by the statement. "You say that as if you're surprised."

"I'm not surprised, per se. I am merely commending you for your efforts. I hope that work of this caliber continues."

Sheldon took a step forward. "I am curious to know how you are sufficiently qualified to provide me with commendation. From a strictly academic standpoint, you are my inferior in many ways. I was chosen for this role precisely because—"

"I know, I know, Sheldon," she said tersely. She dropped her head into her hands, exasperated. "Because you are a genius, you are talented, you are renowned."

"Well, I would have phrased it differently, but that is the essence of it, yes," he replied. She looked at him wearily.

"Sheldon, humility goes a long way towards making a work atmosphere a more pleasant one."

"I am humble," Sheldon insisted. "In fact, my humility is one of the things I am most proud of."

"And there it is again!" she said, her voice rising. "That persistent arrogance that is so, so, so—" she stopped.

"So… what?" he asked. She breathed deeply.

"It is best that I check my tongue," she said, calming some.

"How disappointing," Sheldon said. "I would have liked to know how you planned to end that sentence."

She shook her head. "I don't like this… atmosphere in which we are working," she said.

"I'm sorry, which atmosphere would that be?" Sheldon asked.

"An atmosphere of tension and hostility."

Sheldon shrugged, his expression smug. "I feel neither tense nor hostile," he said. "I have been given explicit instruction to work to get along with you, and I feel I have done so. Have I not?" he asked.

She took a moment to reply. "More or less."

"Excellent. Please report that to Dr. Gablehauser, and I would be loath to suffer through another of his tantrums."

"Sheldon, I suspect we will never be best friends," she said. "But I beg that you at least approach me with respect, if not for sincere admiration, at least for my position."
Sheldon rocked his head from side to side, pensively. "I should be able to comply with that."

"Good," she said. "On that note, in a few weeks I will be having a dinner for select members of the team and faculty from the department. Lest you think it is a purely social event, it will contribute to our ruse of being an educational project. You are cordially invited."

Sheldon paused for one second. "What is the dress code?"

"Cocktail," she answered.

"I won't be attending," he said.

"Aww," she said. She ventured an argument he might find persuasive. "Come now. Surely your wife would enjoy a night out."

"I am not married," he said. "I'll find alternative methods to deceive our colleagues. Enjoy your party." And with that, he left.

Dr. Gablehauser had had a long night playing poker with his brother-in-law and two friends from his golf club, and so he was finding it hard to focus on what Attorney Fineman was saying. Especially since "legalese" was not his first language.

"So after all the affidavits are signed and we finish paying the submission fees to the DHS, we should be squared away with the initial step to securing the H1B visas for the new members of the Particle Physics team. Dr. Kripke has really been cooperative in making sure we've complied with all federal regulations."

"Great," Gablehauser said, followed by a long yawn. Attorney Fineman yawned as well. "He is always very helpful. A treasured member of our team."

"I read his book on popular science a few years ago," Fineman said. "For the first time ever I really understood the basics of General Relativity."

"Very nice," Dr. Gablehauser said. "Well on that note, where are we with the…," he paused, his face taking on a graver appearance. Attorney Fineman wasn't following.

"I'm sorry, with the what?" he asked.

"With the… you know," he said, trying to indicate his meaning without actually saying it.

"Ah," Attorney Fineman said. "You're referring to the—"

"Yes, that," Dr. Gablehauser interrupted impatiently.

"I was going to say the Education Initiative," he said, a bit defensively, and to Dr. Gablehauser's chagrin. "Anyway, I wasn't aware that we would be discussing that today. At least without Dr. Zurbriggen present."

"Her presence is not required. Where are we with the visas for our professors who will be travelling with the… Education Initiative?"

"For the most part, it's pretty cut and dry," he said, pulling a folder from his attaché case. He reviewed the list. "There were a few that got preliminary red flags, but it's a minor hiccup. We shouldn't have any real problems."
"Just for the record, who are they?" he asked.

Attorney Fineman ran his finger down the list until he got to the end, and then peered at the names over his glasses. "Dr. Norman Blitz, Dr. Sarah Bates and Dr. Sheldon Cooper."

"Sheldon Cooper?" Dr. Gablehauser said. "I can't fathom why his name would be on that list." His name could not afford to be on that list.

"I'm not sure, either," the lawyer said, nonchalantly. "But in my experience, it's typically something minor, like a driver's license that's too near its expiration date. I wouldn't worry about it."

"Believe me, I won't," Dr. Gablehauser said, rising. "With the way our enrollment numbers are looking for the new semester, I have bigger fish to fry."

Although, he also wondered if anyone would miss him if he took a nap in his car.

Amy sat on a bench outside of a classroom of Marengo Elementary School, staring blankly at her cell phone. She could only play Scrabble for so long before her mind drifted back to the twins and her anxiety returned.

She wasn't quite sure why she was so anxious. Robert and Aditi were the two most wonderful children she had encountered, if she did say so herself. Still, she'd had little exposure to other children at all, and she sometimes wondered if her opinion of them was inflated.

After more than an hour of waiting, the door swung open.

"You're welcome to come back, Dr. Fowler," Dr. Murphy said, and waved Amy in.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Happy Meals! Sheldon's treating.

Amy rose from the bench she was sitting on in the hallway of Marengo Elementary School. At the analyst's invitation, she walked into the kindergarten classroom where Aditi and Robert had been for the last hour. She hadn't stepped foot in an elementary school classroom since her own days as a pupil, and her memories of the experience were tinged with embarrassment and dread. However, this room looked bright and inviting—maybe even hopeful and promising. She heard giggling and spotted the twins in the corner, excitedly digging through a toy box. The analyst motioned for her to have a seat.

"Did they behave themselves?" Amy asked, squatting in a chair better suited for a five-year-old.

Mrs. Murphy nodded, and sat in a chair that was only slightly larger. "Except for a little skirmish over a pencil, they were angels. Nothing like the last twins I tested." She bristled at the memory.

Amy nodded. They tended to behave better with others than with her. "So, how did they do?"

The analyst pulled out a folder and several sheets of paper. "You have two really exceptional children, Dr. Fowler." That opening sentence allayed Amy's fears, and she felt like she could breathe again. "You will be happy to know that both of them scored in the 99 percentile of their age group and showed a 'strong' to 'outstanding' grasp on all basic and even advanced concepts in the areas of math, literacy, spatial skills and cognitive ability." She handed Amy the results.

"Wow," Amy said, reviewing the papers. "That's… excellent news. I suspected as much, but I was afraid that my opinion may have been inflated by maternal bias coupled with the twins' general adorable. Receiving confirmation of their abilities by a professional lends a certain credibility to my findings."

"Well, I 'm glad to be of service," the analyst said. Only one question remained.

"So," Amy began, "do you think there is a chance that they could be enrolled in time for the coming school year?"

The analyst sighed deeply, which Amy took as a bad sign.

"Despite their exceptional scores and outstanding performance, I spoke with the placement coordinator for the elementary division of the school board last night, and I'm afraid there is just no way to get them in. The waiting list for four-year-olds wishing to enroll in kindergarten is simply too long, and even the waiting list for gifted children exceeds the load this school system can support."

Amy accepted this development with some disappointment.

"It never dawned on me that merit would not be enough to get them in school."

"I understand your disappointment, Dr. Fowler," Dr. Murphy said, "however, public school gives
equal priority to all students in our district, regardless of their aptitudes."

Having to postpone their enrollment for one year meant Amy would now have to search for a daycare or maybe a private school, and she considered asking the analyst for a recommendation. After a moment, however, she was struck with a more pressing realization.

"If you spoke with the coordinator last night, why did you precede with the testing today?"

"Oh, well," the analyst looked down, a nervous grin on her face. She turned back up at Amy bashfully. "I'm a bit ashamed to say that when I found out these were the twins of the theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to assess them in person."

"You're familiar with Sheldon?" Amy asked, surprised.

"My son attended Caltech."

Amy nodded, but privately met the news with mixed emotions. She didn't want her children treated like guinea pigs, but she was a little thrilled that they had drawn such excitement.

"I might have like to known that fact before the testing began," she said.

"Of course," the analyst said, contrite. "And you have my apologies if I've acted out of order."

"No harm done," she said. She saw no reason to push the issue. The analyst took a sip from her mug, and then smiled brightly. "And, my secretary tells me that you used to be a scientist as well."

*Used to be?* The clear implication was that Amy no longer was one. It was a new thought for her…and an upsetting one.

"Yes," she replied, more calmly than she felt. "I was a research professor of Neurobiology at UCLA for a number of years before the twins were born," she said.

"Amazing," she said, smiling. "Well then they certainly are at a genetic advantage, having two such intelligent parents."

"I imagine they are," Amy said, still shaken from the earlier comment. She rose, holding out her hand. "Thank you, for your work here," she said. The analyst remained seated.

"Dr. Fowler," she began. Her voice was more serious, and Amy anticipated her next words with some foreboding.

"Yes?" she asked.

"If you could have a seat, there's… something else."

Amy heard that these meetings sometimes turned up preliminary diagnoses of everything from ADHD to autism. She sat back down, bracing herself for the worst. The tiny chair pressed into her back.

"While both of your children are very bright, your son, Robert, is… well, his intelligence is extraordinary."

It was not what Amy had expected.

"By 'extraordinary' you mean?"
"Well, honestly, I've never dealt with children outside of the normal gifted range—if that even makes any sense. Most 'gifted' children have IQs around 135. That is where Aditi seems to be. However, my testing today suggests that Robert may have an IQ much higher than that." She paused, and her face went from being pleasant to absolutely giddy. "If I'm being honest," she said, "I believe he may be a genius."

Amy lived in a world where so-called "geniuses" came a dime a dozen and she'd grown immune to the term. But hearing it applied to her son brought the word back to life. She instinctively turned to Robert, who was dancing animatedly while Aditi beat on a xylophone. "A genius," she said, almost as if she were taking the word for a test drive.

"Indeed," the woman continued. "If you would be interested, I am on the board of a local charter school for such children and would love for you to meet with the staff there." She was growing excited. "They could take you on a tour of the facility, introduce you to some of the educators, inform you about the special accommodations that must be made for children with these specialized educational needs—"

It was a lot for Amy to absorb.

"I would need to… talk this over with his father first," she said.

"Of course," the analyst replied, reeling in her enthusiasm. "There is no rush. You can take your time coming to a decision. But, I do want to add that, if money is an object, I have a grant that would easily cover his tuition."

Amy didn't respond, just stood and motioned to get her children's attention.

"Aditi, Robert," she called. "Come over here. It's time to go." They looked up and then skipped over to where she stood. Aditi wrapped her arms around Amy's legs.

"I'll… get back with you," she told the analyst and, giving her another, final handshake. Then Amy walked down the school corridors and out of the building with her children beside her. She took each child by the hand as they crossed the parking lot. Aditi started giggling.

"Mommy," she said, still laughing. "I was playing the xylophone and Robert was dancing."

"Yep," Robert concurred, suddenly inspired to begin "dancing" again. "I was acting crazy."

Amy looked down at her young son, and squeezed his hand in hers. "You aren't crazy," she muttered solemnly, almost to herself. "Your mother had you tested."

He danced all the way to the car.

Penny stood outside of Leonard's lab. It was the first time she'd been there in over a year, and she'd forgotten how smart and impressive he looked hunched over a metal table, wearing safety glasses and calibrating a laser. She lingered there for a long while, undetected, when he suddenly looked up, probably to check the time or maybe locate a tool he needed. He caught sight of her in the corner of his eye, and did a double take.

"Penny?" he said, as surprised as he was warm. She had doubted coming, but the soft look on his face made her not regret going with her gut. She pushed her oversized purse back on her shoulder and took a step forward.

"Wait," he called to her. She took a step back. He walked over to a pegboard, grabbing a pair of
glasses and handing them to her. "Just in case," he said. She nodded and put them on. "What can I do you for?" he asked.

"I… I talked to Amy about all of this. Well not about this, actually, about something else, but there was something she said that made me realize that… you can't look back. You shouldn't look back. You have to look forward. That's the only way you can see the blessings sitting right in front of you. And sometimes, when you do that, you realize that you already have all you ever wanted."

Leonard chuckled a little, turning his head down. "That sounds mighty close to a country song."

"They get things right sometimes," she said smiling. She drew close and gave him a hug.

"So then you understand why I want to name the baby Beverly?"

She pulled away some, looking up. "Huh?"

"Well, you talked about not looking back and looking forward. That wasn't about my mom?"

"No," Penny said, blind-sided that he had made that connection. "I was talking about us." They let go of each other, barely realizing they had.

"Then I don't understand," Leonard said.

"There's nothing to understand. We have to look at each other and not all the other baggage trying to come between us. What is there not to understand about that?"

"You didn't even think about it, did you? The name Beverly?"

Penny bit her lip and nodded a couple times. "You know, actually, I haven't because it's just so…" She couldn't think of a word, but her face said it all.

Leonard nodded. "That's what I thought," he said. He walked back to the table and resumed working on his equipment. Penny could see he was shutting down.

"Listen," she said, growing annoyed. "What would you say if I wanted to name the baby after my mom?"

Leonard started laughing to himself. It wasn't the reaction she expected.

"What's so funny?" Penny asked.

"You don't want to name the baby after your mother," he said.

She didn't want to, but his smugness was making her angry. "I could."

"We're not naming the baby after your mother."

"Why not, Leonard?"


"No, I don't," she said, crossing her arms and setting her jaw. "Enlighten me."

"Because you're just saying that to get back at me. You barely even talk to your mother. Besides, do you want the baby growing up to be a pot-smoking floater."
Penny flared up at those words. "Well it would be a lot better than her growing up to be a heartless bitch," she shouted back.

Leonard turned to Penny, clearly stunned by the outburst. But as he lowered his head again, Penny saw that he was also very hurt. He stood there without resuming his work. Penny closed her eyes, sorely wishing she could take the words back.

"I'm sorry," she said taking a step forward, and reached out for him. "It's just that—"

"Don't touch me," he said, leaning away from her.

Penny pulled back her hands and stood awkwardly a long time before speaking again. "Leonard, I swear to God I didn't come here to argue with you. But… come on, you know how she is."

"Yes, Penny, I know how she is," he said tensely.

"Then, I just… I don't get it."

He turned to her, and took off his glasses. "My mother has never acknowledged my accomplishments, Penny. Not ever. No matter what I've done, I've always been invisible to her, even when I graduated from high school as valedictorian at 16, even when I got my PhD at 24, even that time that I got the highest score ever in the whole state of New Jersey for Donkey Kong. The governor sent me a plaque in the mail, Penny."

"I know. You told me," she said.

"But she called me the other day and guess what she said?"

Penny shook her head. "I don't know."

"She said that she was proud of me. For all the things I've done in my life, it's this baby that has finally made her proud of me. And I'm not ashamed to say I hope that maybe she and I can finally have the relationship I've always wanted."

Penny shook her head and put her hands over her face, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

But before Leonard could respond, there was a knock.

"Dr. Hofstadter?"

Penny and Leonard looked out at the open door. There was a student standing there.

"I hope I'm not interrupting."

Leonard glanced at Penny. "Nope, you're not,' he said. "What did you need?"

"I'm getting inconsistent output on the spectrometer in the B lab. Can you take a look at it?"

Leonard sighed and flipped a switch, turning off a fan or something else that had been humming before. It suddenly sounded deadly quiet. He walked to the door, pausing in front of Penny as he did.

"I'll… see you when I get home," he said and left. The student followed after him down the hall.
Penny stood a moment, one hand on her belly, the other pulling her purse on her shoulder once again. She took a hard breath, then left.

When Amy got back to the house, she found Sheldon on the couch typing into his laptop. Aditi, still struggling with telling accurate time, thought it meant he had come home early—not that they had gotten home later than usual—and so was pleasantly surprised.

"DADDY!" she squealed, running to him. She hopped on his lap, competing with his computer for limited real estate, and Sheldon just barely moved it out of the way in time. She threw her arms around his neck, and he patted her back while leaning his head against hers. Robert walked up a moment later, plopping down next to his father on the couch. Amy joined them and kissed Sheldon on the forehead.

"Good evening, my lord," she said, while still standing.

"Good evening, milady," he said. "Although, frankly, I suspected I was going to have to file a missing persons' report. I've been trying to reach you for over an hour."

"Curious," Amy said, and checked her phone. A brief investigation revealed it was on silent. Additionally, her apps were scattered all over the screen and there was a download for a Batman game she'd never seen before. She turned to Robert. "What did I tell you was the rule when I let you use my phone?"

Sensing the tension in her voice, he answered quietly, with his head turned down. "Only play the game and don't touch anything else."

"Did you do so?" she asked.

He tucked his head under Sheldon's arm without answering.

"I take that as a 'no,'" she said. "Then there are no more phone games for you until you learn to respect my wishes."

Robert pouted, digging his head deeper behind Sheldon's back.

"Chin up," Sheldon whispered. "My phone has better games anyway."

"Or your father's phone, either," Amy said sternly, as much to Sheldon as to Robert.

"Of course," Sheldon said, and he turned his eyes up towards her with a mischievous evasiveness that made Amy doubt his commitment to the punishment.

"Daddy!" Aditi said, bright and beaming. "I got to play with blocks!"

"Did you?" Sheldon replied. "Was this at the school?" he asked, looking at Amy. Amy nodded.

"There were several cognitive tests," Amy explained, "and one included the use of blocks."


Robert sat up, slightly recovering from his former dismay.

"Dad," he said quietly, twirling the head on his Batman figurine. "We had to find number patterns. Two, four, six, eight, ten..."
"Evens," Sheldon said, dismissively and turned to Amy. "Not very challenging. Those educators are wholly unequipped to assess our children, Amy. They could rattle off such trivial sequences at a much younger age." But Robert wasn't done.

"And also another one," he said. "Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen—"

As he droned on, Sheldon looked up at Amy, noticeably impressed. Amy, however, was a bit unsettled; this conversation was happening faster than she had hoped.

"You know the prime numbers?" he asked Robert.

Robert nodded. "I gotted all the way up to 71."

"You *got* all the way up to 71, dear," Amy said.

"Incredible!" Sheldon gasped. "The twins are already showing the makings of true scientists." Amy could see the sparkle in Sheldon's eye. She had to get the conversation back before it got away from her.

"Then how about we go and get some Happy Meals?" she suggested enthusiastically.

Both kids leapt up, jumping up and down. "YAY!" they yelled.

Sheldon was not so fooled. "I fail to see how that statement would follow the previous one," he said.

"It's a way to celebrate their achievement," she replied. Sheldon rose, pulling Aditi by the hand.

"If I may use a bit of sarcasm," he said, "I can't think of a better way to celebrate their scholastic potential than with a 'meal of processed meat, mystery sauces and animal hormones.'"

"Great," Amy replied. "Then it's your treat."

The Cooper-Fowlers were wrapping up their "meal" at McDonald's when the twins begged to go and play in the indoor jungle gym on the other side of the glass wall. After admonishing them to take their shoes off and play nicely, Amy nodded her head and off they ran. She was disappointed to see that they were the only children there. It seemed like a missed opportunity.

But, it at least gave her an opportunity to break the news to Sheldon.

"I'm glad we had this little outing," she said.

Sheldon looked at her perplexed. "Does McDonald's count as an outing now?"

"Well, you've been so absorbed in your work lately that you were starting to feel like a tenant in the apartment. I'm glad we're getting a moment to be together as a family."

Sheldon nodded. "As am I." He looked out at the twins' playing. It reminded her of the even bigger reason for this excursion and she took a deep breath, gathering herself.

"So, about the testing," she began.

"Ah, yes," Sheldon said enthusiastically. He whipped out his tablet, scrolling through what appeared to be a series of documents. "You'll be pleased with me. Since committing to this 'school endeavor,' I did a bit of research on Marengo Elementary School, and was elated to discover that it
is reputed to be one of the most elite public schools in the district. Both of the mayor's children go there, as well as the grandson of the director of NASA."

"Which is fascinating information, except that… they weren't accepted."

Sheldon snapped his head up. "Impossible."

"Possible," Amy replied, "and true."

"On what grounds, may I ask?"

"Certainly not merit." She pushed a folder in his direction and pointed to their scores. "They both scored in the 99 percentile of their age groups, showing remarkable ability in spatial skills, cognitive ability, mathematics and literacy."

"I expected nothing less," he said. "Then why weren't they accepted?"

"There's no room for them."

"No room!" he said, aghast. "This is lunacy. It's as if this were some publicly-funded program without any standards whatsoever, administered on a first come, first serve basis."

"Actually," Amy said, "that is exactly what it is. We simply came too late."

"How offensive," Sheldon said. He shrugged. "This only leaves us with one choice. We have to seek out alternative institutions in the private sector."

"But I thought you didn't want them going to school."

"That's before I conducted proper research on the topic. It was completely uncharacteristic of me, and, trust you me, it won't happen again." He lifted his tablet. "Elite private schools in Pasadena," he mumbled as he typed. "Non-religious," he added.

"Actually, there may be a school available to Robert," she said.

Sheldon looked up. "Which school would that be?" he asked.

"Mercer Charter School. It's a private school for children of exceptional intelligence and employs cutting-edge methods of training and education." She opened the folder. "There's a pamphlet here."

Sheldon hastily perused it, and then gasped. "The tuition is outrageous," he said. "Why must quality education be so prohibitive in cost?"

"Mrs. Murphy said that she had a grant that would cover his tuition."

For the first time, it seemed to dawn on Sheldon that Amy was only referring to Robert.

"What about Aditi?" he asked.

Amy took a protracted breath. "She wasn't eligible."

Sheldon was clearly upset. "Well, why not?"

Amy spoke carefully, weighing every word. "While she is a very bright little girl, today's test put her IQ in the ballpark of 135. However," she flipped a page in the folder, and pointed to a figure. "The analyst thinks Robert's may be 175… or higher."
It was news that would have made most parents euphoric, but it only made Sheldon more agitated; he just shook his head. "She needs to be retested," he said flatly.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Amy said, "but even if these figures are correct, we need to accept —"

"She needs to be retested," he said loudly, pressing his finger against the table. Amy took a look around, embarrassed.

"You need to calm down," she said. Just then the two children walked out. Aditi tucked herself under Sheldon's arm and Robert walked over to Amy, leaning his head against her shoulder. They couldn't have picked a worst moment to stop playing.

"Would you guys like to play a few more minutes?" Amy suggested. "Daddy and I are talking."

Both children shook their heads no.

"Why not?" Amy asked. Aditi pointed to the glass wall. There was a small child standing there with her face pressed to the window.

"DeeDee," she called. "Wobert! Come pway wif me!"


"They deserve playmates more worthy of their intellect," Sheldon said harshly. He grabbed his jacket and Aditi's hand, and rose to leave. After a moment, Amy and Robert followed behind him.

Amy sat in the lobby of the Biology Department of Santana Community College, preoccupying herself with a triumvirate of Scrabble playing, reciting and finger crossing. This was her fifth interview, and each one seemed more harrowing than that last. If this didn't go well, it had crossed her mind to go down to the local high-school and resolve herself to a life of teaching Physics to disinterested 18-year-olds.

"Dr. Fowler," the receptionist called. Amy stood up, smoothing down the seat of her skirt.

"Here I am," she said. The receptionist nodded.

"You can come back."

Amy lifted her purse and followed.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Penny and Leonard were one of those couples.

Sheldon and Lise-Marie sat across from each other in her office doing the mind-numbing administrative work that Sheldon so hated. He would have remembered, and likely complained, that this non-science related tedium was the very reason he repeatedly turned down promotions and mouthed off at superiors—if his mind hadn't been elsewhere. Lise-Marie noticed his odd disposition.

"Sheldon?" she called to him.

He looked up at her from the stack of inventory approvals. "Yes?"

"You don't seem to be yourself, today," she said. He returned his attention to the papers.

"I assure you I am as much myself today as I have been in the past, and I don't see myself becoming someone else at any point in the future."

Lise-Marie laughed. Sheldon was surprised at her reaction; he had been very serious.

"I only ask," she started again, "because you seem distracted. You have reviewed that one page several times."

He paused, realizing that she was right. And he would have to read it again; he'd already forgotten what it said.

"I imagine my lack of focus is a result of a distressing matter concerning my daughter," he said. "But it is wholly unrelated to our task at hand. I'll redouble my efforts at concentration so I can return to investigating actual science."

He started back writing, but Lise-Marie didn't; she was too distracted. She hadn't known he had any children, and the thought of him having a daughter was all the more intriguing. She was curious and wanted to know more, but tread lightly.

"I do love my father," she recalled wistfully. Sheldon didn't acknowledge the statement. She continued anyway. "In fact, he is the reason I am a scientist."

The confession seemed to capture Sheldon's attention ever so slightly. "How so?" he asked, not turning away from the page.

"Before he retired, he was a welder," she explained, "a humble man. But he has always been fascinated by science and often read to me books about animals, and plants and motion. Some of my fondest memories as a girl were standing on a stool on the roof of our apartment building. My father would sneak us up there and set up his telescope. He'd lean over my shoulders and, with his calloused hand, point out all the constellations: Orion, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor." She sighed at the memory. "It made me a curious person."
Sheldon turned his face up from his work, but didn't look at her. "I think it's very important for young girls to be ruthless in the acquisition of knowledge," he said.

"As do I," Lise-Marie said.

Sheldon turned back to his work, scribbling on the paper. "I don't think her mother understands that," he mumbled, as much to himself as to Lise-Marie.

Lise-Marie's ears pricked up at the mention of a mother. He had already said he wasn't married; she wondered who this woman was.

"Your daughter is very lucky to have you as a father," she said.

Sheldon glanced up at her for the briefest moment. "I would say I am the lucky one," he said. "If I believed in luck."

"Of course," Lise-Marie said nodding calmly. "Of course."

Penny and Leonard were one of those couples. They fought. Not a lot and not viciously, but it was the default way that they worked out the kinks in their relationship. Most of their scuffles blew over in minutes—little flare-ups that quickly became comical fodder for conversation when they hung out with their friends or that turned into inside jokes around the house. This thing between them now, however, was darker, and Penny couldn't remember how it started becoming that way. At this point, she just wanted it to end.

They'd eaten dinner, like most nights, in front of the TV. The practice was probably on the list of cardinal marital sins, or the subject of a whole chapter in one of those marriage books her mother-in-law had written. Since Beverly was divorced, however, and Penny was still married, Penny figured she could afford to trust herself. Besides, she and Leonard liked watching stupid things, like The Bachelor or Entertainment Tonight. The shows were fun and harmless and helped them unwind at the end of the day. On this particular night, they had watched the news. She didn't even know her TV knew how to show the news, but watching it with Leonard gave her a bad premonition, like the only thing they could do together anymore was be gloomy and sad. When the broadcast ended, Leonard hung out a few minutes more before rising and putting his plate in the sink.

"I'm going to bed," he announced. It wasn't even 7:30.

"Why?" Penny asked.

"I'm exhausted," he said. "I feel like someone drop kicked me off of a building."

He padded his way to the bedroom and shut the door. Penny tried to watch Jeopardy alone; there was even a category called "Chick" Flicks that looked interesting. In the end, however, it turned out the category was for films about poultry. Watching the show simply wasn't any fun without Leonard, and so she rose, too, cut out the living room light and walked back to the bedroom. Leonard was already lying down, but his eyes were open and he was staring at the ceiling. She switched into her maternity gown and then lied down beside him. After a while he spoke.

"You were right," he said.

Penny turned to look at him. "About what?"

"About Mom," he answered. "She said she's not coming anymore. She's going to a Neurobiology
conference in Prague."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"She called earlier today."

Penny could tell by the sound of his voice that he was upset. "Maybe it's important," she said.

Leonard shrugged. "More important than the birth of her grandchild?" He turned his head to Penny. "The fact is she never had any intention of coming, Penny. She's a manipulator, just like you said." He looked back at the ceiling. "There probably isn't even a conference in Prague."

Penny looked over at her husband, and she could see how hurt he was. It broke her heart.

"I'm sorry, Leonard," she said.

He was shaking his head. "No, I blame myself. I'm the one that keeps falling for it."

"I'm sure she's still proud of you," Penny said.

"Like hell she's proud of me," he said. "She just tells me those things to build me up so she can tear me down again. I feel like an idiot."

"Hold on," Penny said. "You are not an idiot." Leonard didn't seem convinced. "Look at me," she said. When he didn't, she reached over, cradling his face in her hand. He turned his eyes to her.

"I've been thinking about this a lot and you were right. We can't just walk around hating people. We have to let go of that resentment and move on. You're not wrong for not giving up on your mom."

Leonard turned back to the ceiling and sighed hard. "Why do I let people run over me, Penny? I'm the guy that lived under the tyranny of a Roommate Agreement for a decade. It's almost as if I like the abuse."

"That's what I love about you."

Leonard turned to her, incredulous. "That I like abuse?"

"Of course not," Penny said. "That you give people a chance. That you believe in people. That you believe in me."

He reached over and grabbed her hand, kissing her knuckles. "Either way, Beverly is off the table. Back to the drawing board."

Penny was glad, but even so, the moment was bittersweet. It made her think of her own mother, and it seemed like a good time to share a bit of her own news.

"My mom's back in Omaha."

Leonard looked at her, surprised. "How do you know?"

Penny fiddled with the edge of blanket. "She turned up at my brother's bond hearing. He got her new number."

"Does she know we're expecting?"
"I don't know."

"You gonna call her?"

"I don't know."

Leonard sighed, leaning his head against Penny's. "Why does it have to be so hard?" he asked his wife… and the Universe.

"I don't know," she said, and leaned into his shoulder; she closed her eyes. "Just hold me."

She turned to him, laying her head against his chest, and he pulled her into a full embrace.

"So," Amy explained as she folded towels at the dining room table, "the Chair of the Biology Department continued to talk about the importance of 'labs in the career of a science major,' in spite of the fact that I repeatedly told him that I had no experience at all teaching labs. I emphasized that in the past I had been a researcher with a light teaching load—when I had a teaching load at all—and it was my desire to return to that kind of work. It was only when I grabbed a catalog on the way out that I realized that the 'university' is so small the Biology Department doesn't even have a dedicated lab instructor. And, frankly, the idea of teaching undergraduate Biology makes me want to weep into my pillow." She paused, turning around to look at Sheldon. He was looking into the face of his laptop. "Needless to say, the interview did not go well."

Sheldon provided no response other than the pitter patter of keys.

"Sheldon, are you listening to me?"

"Did you get the job?" he asked.

"I highly doubt it," she said.

"Good," he replied.

His flip response annoyed Amy. "How can you say that?" she snapped.

"A community college?" he scoffed without even bothering to look up. "The notion of you working there is absurd. I'd sooner see you join my sister at Fuddruckers."

"Your sister hasn't worked at Fuddruckers in four years," she reminded him.

"No?" he said.

Amy shook her head. "She works at Macy's."

"Well then I'd sooner have you work a talentless, retail job that requires that you touch people's feet, handle filthy money and spray unsuspecting passerby with fragrance." He looked up from his computer. "How could I have forgotten she works at Macy's?"

Up until then, his apparent nonchalance towards her career had been irritating at worst, but this brisk reply ignited something in her. She stormed over to where Sheldon was sitting, armed with a stack of papers she'd snatched from the dining room table (which was slowly becoming her work station). She dropped them on the laptop on which Sheldon was typing. He stared up at her, baffled.

"Do you have any idea what that is?" she yelled.
"You're yelling," he reminded her.

"You bet I'm yelling," she yelled. "Because you, Sheldon Cooper, apparently don't have the foggiest inkling of what I'm trying to do here."

"I was under the impression you are seeking employment."

"I was under the impression you are seeking employment," she repeated mockingly. She grabbed a group of papers that were stapled together. "This is the eighteenth draft of my curriculum vitae—affectionately known as my CV. It contains ten pages of professional history, filled with all my previous employers, awards, degrees, publications and a selected list of talks I've given. I've 'tweaked' it so many times, I can quote whole sections of it by heart."


"Except that there isn't a single thing on these pages that's less than five years old. Do you have any idea what it's like trying to sell a five-year-old vitae to the chair of a Biology Department?"

"I can't say that I do," he answered.

She grabbed a yellow sheet of paper, ripped from a legal pad. "This," she said, "is a list of every single position I've applied for. How many are on that list?" she asked. Sheldon looked at it.

"Fourteen," he answered.

"Fourteen. Just short of every institution of higher learning, both great and small, in a twenty mile radius. Then with every application come fees and letters of reference and original transcripts and CVs." She grabbed several folders, splaying them like a hand of cards. "Seven is the number of interviews I've been on, each one more nerve-wracking than the last. And I have yet to mention what goes into preparing for them. I have to find someone to keep Aditi and Robert, which is synonymous with finding a time when Penny is available. Then I have to research the particular institution, tweak my CV yet again, and maybe even find a tube of lipstick to slap on at a red light on the way."

"Is the lipstick essential?" Sheldon asked. "Because that seems to be one step you could eliminate."

Amy didn't say anything for a moment, then dropped the folders to the coffee table and plopped down on the couch next to Sheldon. She closed her eyes, shaking her head.

"And you want to know what the number zero is?"

Sheldon looked to her, sadness on his face. He already knew. After a moment of silence, Amy answered her own question.

"I haven't gotten a single job offer," she said. She looked down at her hands, a weak grin on her face. "Seems there isn't much demand for an out-of-work Neurobiologist."

She began to collect the papers dejectedly from his lap and the floor, arranging them into a pile on the coffee table. After a moment Sheldon began to help her. When she was done, she rose to return them to their temporary home on the dinner table, but Sheldon stopped her, grabbing her arm.

"Amy," Sheldon said. She turned to him. "Come to Caltech."

It wasn't what she had expected him to say. She'd all but decided not to ever apply there, and it was the sole university in the region that hadn't received an application from her. Call it fear, maybe
pride… or embarrassment, but she didn’t want to have a career as "the girlfriend of Sheldon Cooper." She had put in long days and spent a lot of effort on her own career. She wasn’t quite ready to let go of the idea that her body of work and scholastic background would be enough to secure her a position. But maybe she couldn’t afford to be idealistic anymore. Maybe it was time to go for a sure thing.

As she turned the matter over in her head, Sheldon noted her reluctance.

"I could set up everything," he said. "Aside from an unfortunate misunderstanding concerning a Jell-O cup in the cafeteria some years ago, the chair of the Biology Department and I have a wonderful relationship."

Amy sat back down and looked at Sheldon. His eyes were bright, and he clearly thought it was a splendid proposal. But she simply wasn’t as enamored with the idea.

"I don't know, Sheldon," she said.

Sheldon seemed surprised at her response.

"Don't you like Caltech?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she replied. "It boasts an elite staff, an ample operating budget, connections to researchers and institutes around the world—" She lifted her head again, and Sheldon was looking at her, his eyes practically sparkling with anticipation. "Are you sure it's not a bother?"

"It's not a bother in the least," he said. "In all honesty, it would be my pleasure."

And suddenly, it dawned on her that he actually wanted her to work there, and she had a vision of midday visits to the Physics building, lunch dates over composition notebooks and them sitting next to each other at meetings of the School of Science. The idea suddenly seemed a lot more attractive. She smiled a little.

"I guess I can't say no, then," she said. "Besides, Caltech might have another certain hold on my affections," she said, touching his arm.

His former anticipation turned into a full-on smile.

"Excellent," he said. "I'll speak with Dr. Cramden tomorrow."

Amy nodded and rose from the couch. She gave Sheldon one more smile before she headed to the bedroom and tried to convince herself that she’d made the right decision.
Howard was in the kitchen finishing up breakfast with the boys while Bernadette was in the laundry room ironing his shirt. Both of them were having a tough go of things.

"Howie!" she called. "I don't like this new starch your mom bought. It's leaving streak marks all over your shirt."

"Let me see it," he called. She appeared in the kitchen, bearing the shirt, and held it up. Howard looked up to discover that there were, indeed, steak marks all over what should have been the day's outfit. "Well then, I'm going to just have to wear something else," he said, while wiping up oatmeal from the table with a rag. "Can you iron the yellow shirt hanging on the back of the door?"

Bernadette looked at her watch. "Wow, Howie," she said, regretful. "I have to leave in 15 minutes and I'm not even ready yet. I wouldn't mind being a little late, but I have a group meeting to attend the third Thursday of every month. Is it okay if I just steam it a little bit to knock out some of the wrinkles?"

"Sure, that'll work," he said, preoccupied with rinsing the boys' bowls in the sink. He shook his head while unbuckling the twins from their booster seats. "I think more oatmeal ended up on the floor than in their mouths."

"Go and get them ready for daycare and I'll get the floor," she said.

"Thanks!" he said with a smile, then started walking the boys to the door when he suddenly turned around. "Hold on. What's today, again?"

"It's the twentieth," she answered.

"Aw man."

"What is it, Howie?" she asked.

"I have to attend a mandatory awards ceremony for all the students who worked with us this summer in the REU. That means you're going to have to watch the kids tonight."

"Is this one of those formal dinners?" she asked. "Because if so, I really think I should go with you."

"Yeah, right. I wish. It's actually a whole bunch of annoyed staff members sitting in the auxiliary theater, while we listen to boring speeches and clap every 30 seconds. It shouldn't last more than a couple hours, tops."

Bernadette sighed reluctantly. Howard saw her apprehension. He stooped down to the boys' level.

"Let's see which one can go the bedroom and take off their PJs the fastest!"
Both boys took off. Howard walked over to his wife, putting a hand on each of her arms. "Look, Bernie—you can do this. It's not as hard as it looks."

She relented a little. "I know, it's just when they start playing or running around or throwing food or jumping on the couch—" With each statement, her anxiety level rose. Howard hugged her, and then looked her in the eyes.

"It's for a few hours, that's all. I'll be home no later than eight. Pick the boys up from daycare at the JCC by five-thirty, give them something to eat, maybe read them a little story, and put them to bed. It won't be hard, I promise." He kissed her on the forehead.

"Okay," she said. He walked off towards the boys' bedroom. She took a deep breath, and then grabbed the mop.

Amy was sitting in Dr. Cramden's office nursing a cup of coffee as she waited for her to return for the interview. Amy didn't feel as nervous as she had in interviews past and, despite all, she was wearing a very tasteful shade of pink lipstick. After a few minutes, Dr. Cramden returned.

"So, Amy," Dr. Cramden said, then paused. "I'm sorry, Dr. Fowler. I feel like I know you even though I suppose I don't. We did meet once, at the Honors Banquet a few years ago."

Amy would typically be reluctant to invite a potential colleague to call her by her first name in an interview, as it seemed overly familiar, but she figured this would be the time to make an exception.

"No, please," she said. "Call me Amy. And I do seem to remember making your acquaintance. I believe we chatted a bit on the G8 summit."

Dr. Cramden seemed to have forgotten that point, and her face brightened at the recollection. "Indeed we did." She nodded once, pleasantly. "Well, I look forward to having more conversations in the future."

"I do as well," Amy concurred. She took the mention of future conversations a good sign, although the thought crossed her mind that Dr. Cramden could have just been referring to another chance meeting at some Caltech event that Amy might attend on Sheldon's arm.

"So," Dr. Cramden said, returning to the paperwork in front of her. "I would like to begin with a few questions.

Amy was expecting the chairperson to ask her to share a little about herself. It seemed like a popular way to begin an interview.

"So," she began. "How did it come about that you were on the cover of Neuron?"

"Oh," Amy said, thinking back on that time, "I submitted an abstract to give a talk at a conference that the periodical was hosting, and subsequently was invited to have my findings published in the magazine. It goes without saying that it was a true honor for me, and helped boost the esteem of our research group while opening up some opportunities for us, financial and otherwise."

Dr. Cramden nodded. "That's exciting," she said smiling, and turned back to her paper. She seemed poised to ask another question, when she suddenly looked up. "Oh, I meant to mention—I see that you're going to be a working mom. I don't know if Dr. Cooper told you or not, but we have a Child Care Center on campus. Would you be interested in having your children go there?"
Amy was surprised. "Um, I honestly wasn't aware such a provision was available. It's definitely something I'd like to explore."

Dr. Cramden smiled. "I can give you the number before you leave."

"Thank you," Amy said.

"My pleasure," she replied.

A smile came across Amy's face. This interview was going very well.

Bernadette had gotten home from work a little after five, full of anxiety about the night ahead of her. But now, she was in bed enjoying what she was privately calling "Me Night." It consisted of a cup of chamomile tea, relaxing music, and the book she had been dying to read. Not two weeks ago, she had set out to find a bit of light reading, something she could hold in hands, that she could sink her teeth into and that was filled with mystery and intrigue and a compelling story of love and loss. She had prowled the shelves of the bookstore, not resting until she found the perfect tome. Now in bed, with her Kindle somewhere in the living room, she was just in the middle of reading about the climax of the effort to eradicate small pox when she saw her phone lighting up on the nightstand. She could barely pull herself away from the page, but finally checked her phone. It was Howard.

"Hello, sweetie," she said, happy and bright.

"Where are the boys?" he asked, without even saying hello. It wasn't like him, and she felt a bit flustered.

"They're in bed, asleep," she said.

"Are they?" It was almost like he knew they weren't, and she began to wonder if he wasn't calling from somewhere in the house. Pulling her robe around her, she rose from the bed and left the bedroom.

"Um," she said as she walked down the hall, "I'll admit, I might have fibbed a little. They are with your mom in her apartment."

"Bernie," he moaned.

"What?" she said defensively. "They wanted to be with her, she wanted to be with them, I got to read my book—win/win/win." She peeked into the bathroom, kitchen and living room and didn't see him anywhere. It was a little disconcerting.

"Only thing is… you're wrong again," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"My mom, the boys and I are at the emergency room."

Bernadette stopped in her tracks, stunned. In the span of seconds, her mind started racing, picturing the boys in every horrifying scenario possible: broken limbs, burns, contusions… or worse. "The emergency room?" she repeated.

"Yes, the emergency room."

"Why?" she asked.
"Because while you were 'reading your book,' my mom went to pick one of them up and threw her back out again. When she couldn't get you, she called an ambulance. Didn't you hear the sirens?"

"I just thought she was watching one of her cop shows. She turns the volume up so loud I couldn't tell the difference."

"Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"It was on silent," she said, upset with herself. "I thought I would see it if it lit up."

"Bernie, they never should have been with my mom in the first place. She just had a major back injury and she's in no position to take care of two rambunctious little boys."

"I had no idea it was that serious," Bernadette said in her defense. "I wish she had said something,"

She thought Howard would upset, but instead his voice sounded sad. "No, you, their mother, should have been taking care of them."

Bernadette put her hand over her face, ashamed. "I'm sorry, Howie," she said. "Wait right there; I'm on my way."

When Bernadette got to the emergency room, she had to wait in line behind three people before she could be seen. It was probably only ten minutes before she reached the reception desk, but it felt like an eternity. She was told that her mother-in-law was behind curtain F-6 and the woman handed her a visitor's name tag. After being buzzed in, Bernadette made her way back.

When she got to the "room," she saw Howard sitting in a chair outside the curtain. Both boys were on his lap, each one leaning on one of his shoulders. All three were asleep.

"Howie," she called in a loud whisper. He didn't respond. "Howie," she called again, tapping his knee.

He began to stir and, after a moment of wincing against the relatively dim light, he realized he was staring at Bernadette.

"Hi," she said, awkwardly.

He sat up just a little. "Hey," he replied, still a bit groggy. "Can you pick up Joel? He's cutting off the blood to my right arm."

Bernadette quickly complied, picking up the young tot and placing his head over her shoulder. He didn't wake up.

"How's your mother?" she asked.

Howard shook out his arm, apparently trying to get the feeling back. "She's mostly okay. They're going to give her some pain pills and another shot."

Bernadette felt horrible. "I'm sorry about all of this," she said. Howard only made fleeting eye contact.

"Yeah," he replied. His mother heard them talking.

"WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO, HOWARD!" she yelled from behind the curtain.
"BERNADETTE!" he yelled back.

"OHHH," she replied loudly and with more than a little sarcasm. "SO NICE OF YOU TO JOIN US."

Bernadette sighed. Someone made a shushing sound from the next curtain over.

"OH SHUSH YOURSELF," Mrs. Wolowitz shouted back.

The commotion woke up Joel and he lifted his head from Bernadette's shoulder. After a moment, he realized that he was with her and started looking around. When he spotted Howard, he started whining and reached for his father, practically leaping from Bernadette's arms. She carried him over to Howard and placed the boy on his lap. Joel wrapped his arms around Howard's neck and immediately fell back asleep. Howard stared at the slumbering boy a moment, and then looked back up at Bernadette. The look he gave her made her think one thing:

*I'm a terrible mother.*

Sheldon walked through the door to find his family in the throes of a lively game of "Just Dance." He found the game troublesome to say the least, starting with its very premise. Far from a true dancing game, it only judged one's ability to synchronize the movements of the players' right hands with their on-screen avatars. Additionally, the game subjected its players to an endless line-up of annoying pop songs and didn't teach them any of the classic ballroom dances that he had learned in cotillion as a boy.

Besides, he had never won. Not even once. A fact that only confirmed the idiocy of the game.

Aditi squealed as he entered the door and wrapped her arms around his legs. He absently patted her on the back. Amy paused the game and walked over to where he was, giving him a peck on the cheek. Robert, who would normally be excited as well, had the reaction of a true gamer in the making.

"Mommy!" he whined, impatient for the game to resume.

"One moment," she said. She turned back to Sheldon. "How was your day?"

He nodded. "Interesting."

She listened to what he wasn't saying. "Just interesting?"

He gave her an odd look. "Let's talk about it later."

Amy nodded. "Very well then," she said. "In personal news, my day was very promising."

Sheldon seemed to emerge from whatever preoccupying him, and he looked at Amy. "You had the interview today?"

"Indeed I did," she said smiling.

"And how did it go?" he asked.

"Swimmingly," she answered. "Dr. Cramden and I struck up an immediate rapport, and throughout the interview she alluded to the future. Of course, I have to wait to be offered anything officially, but I have much higher hopes for this one. In fact, I would be shocked if I didn't get it."
Sheldon smiled. "I'm glad," he said.

She could see the genuine joy in his eye, but his reserved response betrayed the fact that something else was amiss. He was uncharacteristically quiet during dinner, and for the first time since the project began, he didn't touch a bit of his work, and even prepped the kids for their baths. When he and Amy settled in for bed, she reminded him of his earlier promise to tell her about his day.

"What is it that you wanted to tell me, Sheldon?" she asked.

He turned to her. "It seems that my visa petition, though assured, has hit a roadblock."

This was distressing news. "Why?"

"I don't know. I will be having a meeting with the University lawyer and dear old Dr. Gablehauser tomorrow to sort through the seedy details."

"But your visa is assured, right? Like you said?"

"It has to be," he replied, almost wishing it to be so.

He sighed and reached for the lamp, but before he did, he leaned over and gave her a kiss.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she said. "Mistakes like these happen all the time."

"I hope you're right," he said, and turned off the light.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Howards cleans out the car.

Howard was scrubbing dried-up, sticky Kool-Aid out of the cup holders in the back of their Ford Escape. He was saving the worse job for last: cleaning the endless abyss of crumbs, toys and other paraphernalia between the two car seats. If he didn't know better, he would think the boys were storing their stuff there in the case of a disaster. He looked up from spraying the cup holder with Windex, when he saw a short blonde woman, on her tiptoes, staring at him through the window. A moment later, she opened the door.

"I brought you some Gatorade. It's kind of hot out."

He barely acknowledged the gesture.

"Um," he said, looking around. "Just stick it anywhere." He resumed scrubbing. She looked around for a spot, and then just dropped it into one of the car seats. "Thank you," he muttered.

"You're welcome," she said, somberly. She didn't leave. "Do you need any help?" she offered.

He sat up, alarmed. Adam and Joel were too little to be in the house alone. "Where are the boys?" he asked. She pointed. They were sitting on the porch, both sipping on what appeared to be juice boxes.

He was relieved, and returned to his work.

"So did you need any help?" she asked.

"I've got it," he replied, a bit tersely. Bernadette noticed his tone.

"I said I was sorry, Howard," she said.

"I know," he replied without looking up. "You've apologized. Many times. But frankly, I don't need it. You didn't do anything to me."

"I apologized to your mom, too," she reminded him. "I even scrubbed her feet last night, and if that's not penance, I don't know what is."

He rolled his eyes and turned his head away. "You should have let me do her toenails, Bernadette. They need to be clipped a certain way."

"I did the best I could," she said, "but they curve down." She scrunched up her face. "And they're thick."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure she was just happy to have you over there," he responded. "She was never upset to begin with. She loves keeping the boys."

"So why are you still mad at me?" Bernadette asked. "I don't know what else I can do."
He stopped scrubbing and finally met her eyes. "You can start being a mother to our kids."

She didn't say anything. Her silence seemed to inflame him more.

"I mean, isn't that what you signed up for when you put your name on the dotted line? I didn't adopt them alone, Bernadette."

"I told you I'm not good with kids, Howard. You already knew that."

"Yeah, but I figured, 'She's just saying that now, but when she looks in those little brown eyes, pats that coal black hair, watches their little feet scamper around the house, something'll change. They'll melt her heart.'" He stopped a moment. "I mean… don't you feel anything?"

"Of course I do," she said, coming a step closer. And honestly, Howard was shocked at how heartfelt she sounded.

"That's hard to believe," he said. "You treat them like plants that you can just water and place in a window and then walk away from, like all you're trying to do is keep the boys alive."

She looked down and bit her bottom lip. "I must confess that when they first got here, I was so overwhelmed by the whole situation that I didn't have any real intentions of stepping up. All I could play in my mind were the hours and hours I spent as a teenager changing diapers and making peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and rescuing cats out of the washing machine."

"Your siblings would put the cat in the washing machine?"

"They were sadistic little imps," she said, grimacing at the memory.

"But Joel and Adam aren't," he replied, growing agitated again. "They shouldn't suffer for what your little brothers and sisters did."

"I know, and I realize that now." She smiled a little to herself. "Sometimes I watch them, while they're sleeping. I look at their little round faces and cherubic lips, and in those moments, I think about playing with them. But then I realize… I don't know how." She looked at the boys on the porch. "You're so good at making the voices at story time and buying the right bath toys and doing your little magic tricks. All I know how to do is yell and scream and put kids in the closet until they promise to eat all their peas."

"Gosh, Bernie," Howard said, "you might have abused those kids."

"I might have," she said nodding. "I don't want to hurt the boys, Howie."

For the first time, he could see something in her other than a cold heart. Sure, he saw a little fear, but he also saw someone who actually did care. He even saw the mother that he suspected was inside her all along. He reached out his hand and she took it. He was about to tell her that, little by little, she could get there—and that he would help her do it—when he heard someone lightly rapping on the other car door. Howard turned around and opened it. Adam was standing there. Joel was behind him.

"Park?" Adam asked.

"Park?" Joel echoed.

There was a park down the block with a jungle gym, slide and swings, and the boys loved going there. Howard loved taking them, but he still had chores to get done. He picked Adam up.
"I can't go now, buddy," he said. "I'm cleaning. But maybe later. Or tomorrow."

Adam probably didn't understand every word Howard had said, but he managed to get the point that the answer was 'no.' He poked out his lip, clearly disappointed.

"I'll take them," Bernadette said. Howard turned around and looked at his wife. "I'll take them," she repeated.

"Are you sure?" Howard said apprehensively. "The way the sun is out today, they're going to need some sun block, and then they get really wound up on the jungle gym. Joel likes to pick up strange objects, so you have to keep an eye on him and Adam still has accidents, so you might have to take his Pull-Ups." He shook his head. "Really, I can just take them later."

"It's fine," she insisted. "I can take them. I want to. Just... just tell me what to do."

Howard smiled, nodding. "Okay."

Bernadette smiled too.

Amy was wrist deep in cookie-dough when the phone rang. Rushing from the table where Aditi and Robert licked a batter-coated mixing spoon and spatula respectively, Amy turned on the cold water with her elbow and stuck her hands under the faucet. Unfortunately, the batter was much gooier than it should have been, and wasn't coming off quickly enough under the running water.

Aditi saw it as an opportunity to be helpful. "I'll answer it, Mommy," she announced merrily.

"NO!" Amy said, but the little girl already had the phone to her ear. Robert put both hands over his mouth, completely scandalized by Aditi's boldness.

"Hello!" the little girl said. There was a pause, and Amy frantically wiped her hands on a towel. "She's washing her hands," Aditi explained. Amy took the phone from her daughter's hand.

"I apologize for that," she said. "How many I help you?"

The woman on the other end chuckled. "That's quite alright. We were calling to notify you of the results of your interview."

Her voice sounded promising and Amy could barely contain her excitement. "Yes?"

"You are a candidate for the final round of interviews. We would like see you on Thursday in the afternoon, if that is okay with you."

"Absolutely!" Amy replied, more enthusiastically than she intended.

"Will you need to jot down our address or phone number again?" the woman offered.

"No, I'm very familiar with Caltech," Amy explained. "I know how to get there."

"No, this is not for the position at Caltech," the woman said. "I'm sorry if I wasn't clear. This is for the assistant professorship position you applied for at Pasadena University."

Amy was speechless. She had abandoned the hope of working there weeks ago.

"Are you still interested in taking the position?" the woman asked.
Amy was too flummoxed to even have an opinion. "I... I imagine I would be," she stammered.

"Is that a yes?" the woman asked; her question needed an answer. Amy had one.

"Yes. Yes it is," she answered quickly. "Put me down for three o'clock."

"Very good," the woman said. "We will see you then." She hung up.

Amy held the phone in front of her mouth, lost in thought and privately celebrating what the phone call meant—confirmation that she was still in the game.

Meanwhile, her daughter was having a private celebration of her own.

"I answered the phone!" she declared proudly, unaware of her transgression. Fortunately for her, Amy had forgotten as well.

She pointed to her son and then to her daughter. "Robert, set the timer to twenty minutes and Aditi, get out the icing," she declared.

"But I thought these weren't going to be too sweet?" Robert said, winding back the dial on the egg timer.

"There's been a change of plans," Amy said. "I believe a little celebration is in order."

Meetings came a dime a dozen, and most of them flew by like cacti in the dessert. *These*, however, were the meetings that made Lise-Marie sit up and pay attention. When Siebert showed up, something important was happening, and wherever something important was happening that's where she wanted to be.

"Thank you for coming," Dr. Siebert said, looking up from an engaging cup of coffee and a stack of folders.

"My pleasure," she answered. "My pleasure."
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

So, about Enrico...

Positioned at the head of a small conference table, Dr. Siebert seemed very distracted and had taken the third phone call in a row since Lise-Marie arrived. He hadn't even bothered to sit down. As he usually didn't speak on the phone during meetings, she was becoming suspicious as to why she had been called to his boardroom at all; it seemed a bit disrespectful for him to be so careless with her time. As she overheard him prattle on about re-accreditation standards for the Nursing program, she took a glance around the boardroom. His walls were lined with signed pictures of himself with famous commencement speakers and noted politicians, framed awards, honorary degrees and other evidence that Dr. Siebert was living the life of a high-profile man of education. The mementos reminded her of her own goals, and why she was here.

He hung up and immediately set to working on his tablet computer. Then he glanced up, only briefly, as if reminding himself she was there.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Zurbriggen," he said, still punching away. "I don't want to prolong this meeting any longer than I have to."

"Take your time, sir," she said, while actually feeling quite the opposite.

"No," he said, "I'll keep this brief." He finally sat down and closed the leather portfolio before him, meeting her eyes. "How would you assess Dr. Cooper's performance on the project thus far?"

She hadn't anticipated that question, but she had an answer to give nonetheless. "Excellent," she answered. "His reputation as an eccentric genius is well-deserved, but there's no questioning the fact that he is a top-rate scientist and, overall, it's been a pleasure to work with him."

Siebert nodded. "And with his team? How has he done with them?"

"My personal observance of his dealings with them has been minimal," she confessed. "But based on the work they're producing, I'd say all is going well. What he lacks in people skills he seems to make up for in genuinely inspiring people to be great. Greatness tends to beget greatness."

Dr. Seibert seemed sincerely surprised at such an assessment. "I've worked with Dr. Cooper for a very long time," he said. "But recently I think I've seen some of his best work to date. He really seems invested in this endeavor."

"I would agree with that," she said. "Although, I assure you, he is not a one-man band."

"Of course not," Dr. Siebert said. He sighed, drumming his fingers against the portfolio. He looked down as he thought.

"Are we done here?" Lise-Marie asked.

Dr. Seibert looked up. "How would you feel about returning to Switzerland?"
This question was even more startling than the last, and forming a response proved to be more difficult. She was careful with her answer.

"It is my intention to return at the end of the project. I have no plans to immigrate to the United States."

"No. I mean, how do you feel about returning sooner?"

Lise-Marie wasn't following. "What are you suggesting, Dr. Siebert?"

"I have no strong opinion about it personally, but at the beginning of this project, I requested that the Large Hadron Collider lend us someone from its facility to help, well, manage Dr. Cooper. And you have done a fine job in fulfilling that commission."

Those words upset Lise-Marie. "Surely my value here is more than just a daycare worker? Am I just a babysitter who reports on what the children do while mommy is away?"

"Absolutely not," Dr. Siebert said. "And I apologize if I have implied otherwise. However, as his performance seems stellar, and you have a position waiting for you in your home institution, the Collider is asking me to justify your presence here."

"That is simple," she replied emphatically. "I've been the primary liaison between the two institutions as well as the two teams. I have been charged with amassing the reports and general oversight of the daily tasks. My role here is an essential one."

Dr. Seibert put his hand to his chest. "I know that very well," he insisted. "However, you do understand my position, don't you? I have to justify your role to the higher ups, to the powers that be, as it were."

"Are you not one of those powers?"

"I am in a sense but, ultimately, decisions like this one are out of my hands."

Lise-Marie remained silent, too agitated to speak. Dr. Siebert noticed her displeasure.

"Is being at the LHC really so bad?" he asked. "I know people who would sell their own mothers to find a place there."

"Of course it's an extraordinary place to make a career, but I am just a cog in the wheel there. Here, in this position..." she stopped talking, weighing her words. "Frankly, Dr. Siebert, I have ambitions and I am always looking towards the horizon. Coming on this project was a windfall for me, but one that I deserve; I don't want it to be taken from me so casually."

"To tell you truth, I've been stalling them," he said. "The reality is they can call you back to Switzerland at anytime. Tomorrow if they want." She turned away, deflated by this news but fighting to contain her composure. "Look, I just wanted to have this chat so we could work together to keep you here as long as you want to be here." He gave her a cordial smile and scooped up his portfolio. "Have a good day Dr. Zurbriggen," he said. "We'll be in contact."

She nodded and watched him as he left. When the door shut, she dropped her head to the table. She felt like the wind had been let out of her sails. Then suddenly, she sat back up.

What was she doing? She was Lise-Marie Zurbriggen, dammit. She'd come too far to give up now. And one thing was sure.
She wasn't going anywhere.

Amy put a lasagna in the oven and then checked her watch. Sheldon had said he would be home by seven-thirty and, given that he was a stickler for punctuality, his tardiness was beginning to be a matter of concern. As if Sheldon had read her mind, her phone rang and his name was on the caller ID.

"The kids are down, and the lasagna is in the oven," Amy said in lieu of a greeting. "Please tell me you are on your way with the Italian dressing."

In a Caltech hallway across town, he looked down at his watch and then at the door of his office. "I'm afraid to report that I am going to be late."

Amy licked a bit of tomato sauce off of her finger. "How late?"

"I can't imagine I'll be home any later than nine-thirty. Ten o'clock at the latest."

"Ten o'clock?" she said aghast. "But what about dinner with Penny and Leonard?"

"You'll have to give them my regrets," he replied.

She leaned against the counter, a bit disappointed. "We were all looking forward to this, Sheldon. Penny's in the final month of her pregnancy, and I'm sure this was supposed to be the last big dinner." She sighed. "Your working until six-thirty or seven was tolerable, but any later and I'm beginning to feel like I barely see your body at all. And never mind the children."

"Amy, as I've previously explained, this is a temporary arrangement. Due to forces beyond my control, our research group is obliged to reach certain federal benchmarks. Missing these deadlines could derail the project entirely."

Amy was silent for a long time. She thought back to the promise she'd made and what that meant. Sacrifices would be necessary; patience and support would be required. She took a deep breath, calming a little.

"Have you eaten anything?" she asked.

"I've already ordered delivery."

She smiled a little. Then she thought of something else. "How will you get home?"

"Enrico, naturally."

About "Enrico": he was the latest addition to their family, a thoroughly researched bicycle that Sheldon had purchased to 'afford himself greater independence and mobility. Giving the bike a name had been an indulgence that had irked most of his acquaintances, but Amy found the bicycle perturbing for different reasons. Once it was taken outside of the tranquil roads of their neighborhood, she saw it as an instrument of death; Pasadena drivers were notoriously aggressive and bike lanes were spotty throughout the city. She particularly was nervous when he rode it at night.

"Please allow me to pick you up," she pleaded.

"I won't hear of it," Sheldon said. "I have my safety helmet, pepper spray, reflective vest and bike horn, and I am thoroughly prepared for any eventuality. You have absolutely nothing to worry
There was a long pause, and Sheldon sensed that she was relenting.

"Fine, but don't expect me to be asleep. I can't slumber knowing you're riding a bike home that late at night."

"I'd much prefer that you went to bed," he said.

"Just promise me you'll take a couple hours off to go to the orientation for Robert's school. You need to be there."

"And I will be," Sheldon assured her. "You have my word."

The conversation had reached its natural conclusion. "I love you, Sheldon," she said.

"As I do you," he said.

He waited a moment, and after hearing the line go dead he hung up. He entered his office and took a seat at his desk.

Her hand was hovering above a slice of vegan pizza that Sheldon found to have a disconcerting lack of cheese.

"One slice left," Lise-Marie said. "And be not fooled by my size; my appetite is famously ample."

"Be my guest," he said. "I judge my pizza in much the same way I judge my movie adaptations: I insist they maintain a certain amount of fidelity to what the creators intended."

She smiled. "Very well then." She scooped it up and ate heartily. "More for me," she said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

"And so it is," he said. "Shall we get back to work?"

Lise-Marie just nodded.

Meanwhile, Amy began her evening as the hostess, orchestrating a meal of salad (now with oil and vinegar), lasagna, and accompanying bread, that was finished off with a homemade tiramisu that she had learned how to prepare in another life. Although the evening had been billed as an opportunity to catch up with the expectant couple and, in Sheldon's words, "bestow them with the valuable knowledge" that he and Amy had acquired as parents, Amy had to explain to her guests that Sheldon had to work. Penny might have been relieved at this development, though Leonard took the news with aplomb, if not some surprise. Otherwise, the evening went smoothly (in a way it only can with old friends), and even the children, who usually battled bedtime, fell asleep promptly and remained that way, without so much as a peep.

As dinner drew to a close, Leonard and Amy somehow began discussing the finer points of Constructal Law. Not so much discussing it, really, as giddily dissecting the topic. Penny had been listening for minutes and couldn't make out whether they thought it was ridiculous or fantastic, but she was bored, and more pressingly, she had to try to survive the conversation without the assistance of alcohol. When Amy rose to get more ice, Penny decided she couldn't take anymore.

"Save me," she groaned as Amy retook her seat.

"From what?" Amy asked, glancing at Leonard.
"Constructal Law," she said, as if collapsing to the table.

"Ah," Amy said, and then cleared her throat. "I don't know where you stand on the issue, but while I find it thrilling to ponder a Physics theory that would have biological implications while potentially resolve the Design issue, the empirical nature of the matter—"

"Pause," Penny said, gesturing for a time-out. "When I said 'save me,' I meant save me. Not finish me off."

"Then I take it you would like to change the topic,"

"Just a little," Penny said. "This was supposed to be some kind of Parenting Night, right? Maybe we can talk about something related to the twins. Like bedtime. Did the twins go to sleep alright?"

"In fact they did, which mercifully went better than last night, when Robert got a Barbie shoe stuck up his nose. A pair of tweezers quickly resolved the matter."


"That story elicited an affectionate response in you?" Leonard asked.

"Yeah. Is that weird?"

"Maybe a little," he said.

"It's just, I guess that now that I'm pregnant, everything about motherhood—from the tiny booties, to the car seats, to Barbie shoes getting stuck up noses—all seems so wonderful. I am just ready for what's next."

Amy smiled. "I look back fondly at the mix of emotions that accompanied my own introduction to motherhood," Amy said. "It was intimidating in many respects, but I had women around me who were more than willing to ease me into that new stage of my life."

"Awww," Penny sighed longingly. "Women like your mom?"

"Indeed," Amy replied. "Despite the occasional bit of unwelcomed meddling, my mother offered me truly inspired bits of information on everything from diaper rash to burping techniques. Even Sheldon's mother was a font of wisdom once we sorted through some of the more dubious old wives' tales. Her specialty? Twins. I can't say enough about her lessons on tandem breastfeeding."

Leonard squirmed a little in his seat. Penny, however, was fascinated.

"That's the thing," she said, absently rubbing her now very prominent belly. "Leonard and I have been a little bummed about how deprived we are in the mother department. My mother actually smoked pot when she was pregnant with me." She looked away, her eyes steely. "The reckless wench," she muttered.

"That's not how you usually tell that story," Amy said. "In the past you've presented it as an amusing anecdote that proves the folly of worrying too much about things."

"Yeah, that's before I got pregnant. Now it's a tragic story of my mother being a reckless wench."

"Well, my mom probably could have taken a hit off of a couple joints when we were growing up," Leonard said. "Anytime you have to build a hugging machine to get a little affection, your mom's too uptight. While giving me one of several talks on the 'birds and bees,' she once told me that the
shape of my head did irreparable damage to her... you know, down there."

Amy examined his head from a distance. "You do have a rather large head, Leonard."

"The point is," Lenard continued, "my mom is nuts."

Amy nodded. "Which is also a valid argument. Although, Sheldon is quite taken with her parenting advice. I've even found nuggets of truth in the limited portions of her literature that I've read."

Leonard shook his head. "Sure she's written a lot of books and has a lot of letters behind her name, but she raised me, okay? There's a world of difference between writing a book and being a loving, caring, supportive mother."

"Spoiler alert!" she said. "Pratfalls of the Loving, Caring, Supportive Mother is the next in her series. I hope that little tidbit didn't ruin the ending."

Leonard rolled his eyes.

Meanwhile, Penny scanned the table. "Let me help you get these plates up," she said, rising.

"No, I'll do it," Amy said, getting up as well.

"No, I'll do it," Leonard said, also standing and taking the plates from Amy's hands. She gave him a hesitant look. "No, I insist. You made the meal, Penny's feet are swollen. Really. It's the least I can do."

"Suit yourself," Amy said, and returned to her seat. Leonard turned on the faucet to make dishwater.

Amy and Penny engaged in some girl talk. The conversation turned to an allergist who also specialized in alternative remedies for pregnant woman. Amy had the number somewhere in her house phone. She rose to check, when Penny stopped her.

"This is one of the perks of pregnancy. You get the perks too while you're with me," she snickered. "Leonard!" she called. "Can you get the number to Amy's allergist out of the caller id on her house phone? Her names Erin Jacobs."

He nodded eagerly. "Sure, gimme a sec." He dried his hands and jogged over to the phone.

As they waited, Amy noted the faint sorry in Penny's face. "You okay, Bestie?" she asked.

Penny looked up. "Yeah," she said, a sad smile on her face. "Don't mind me."

"It's your mother, isn't it?"

"It's just... I haven't heard from her in almost two years. And my brother... he gave me her number the other day."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. It's like, I'm afraid or something. Of what I don't know." She chuckled. "I know I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy," Amy said. "There are real reasons why we feel the way we feel."

"I know," Penny said, "all the chemicals in our brains and synapses and whatever make us like
Amy shook her head. "Actually I was just going to say that becoming a mom is scary. It's nice to have your mom give you a hand."

"It's really that simple, isn't it?" Penny said. Amy nodded. "You think I should call her?"

Amy thought a second. "Yes. If not for her, then for yourself. Experience being her daughter one more time. After you have your own kids, it changes forever."

Just then, Leonard turned up with a number on the back of a piece of junk mail. "Here you go. Erin Jacobs," he said.

"Thanks, sweetie," Penny said, looking at the paper in her hand.

"You're welcome," he said, then looked at Amy nervously. "Anytime."

After hanging up with Amy, Sheldon had felt a twinge of regret for missing the dinner, but it only took a couple seconds for him to get back into the zone of his work. He stared at his computer screen, with his head leaning against his hand, in deep concentration.

His train of thought was interrupted by the sensation of someone watching him.

"You were gone an awfully long time," Lise-Marie said.

"Does that bother you?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said. "But as I've mentioned once before, I am a curious person."

"Well, it is said that curiosity killed the cat," he answered.

"I will take my chances," she replied, rising to throw away her paper plate. "A life of boredom and complacency is hardly a life worth living."

Sheldon didn't reply.

"No comment from Dr. Cooper?" she goaded.

"It's not a matter I care to pursue."

She sat down again, perching on the corner of his desk. "You know, Sheldon," she said, apparently insistent on conversing, "you and I are not that different."

"In what way?" he asked, indifferent to her proximity.

"Your very presence here tonight suggests that you are a person who will not be easily turned aside from your mission once it is engaged. Frank left us hours ago, and yet you remain."

"Frank is unable to compartmentalize his life. As he works, he thinks of home and I imagine at home he thinks of work. That scattered focus impedes his productivity and, come to think of it, seems to be a common thread among experimentalists." He looked at her. "I, however, am a purer man of science."

"Do not be so hard on the rest, Sheldon," she said. "Besides..."
Sheldon waited for the end of the statement, but she ended there and rose, returning to her original spot. Nothing so rattled Sheldon like an incomplete thought and, sufficiently distracted, he turned to her and with a pointed facial expression, all but demanding that she complete her statement. She ignored his face.

"What were you going to say?" Sheldon asked.

"Nevermind. Perhaps I spoke too hastily," she said, and for the first time in quite some time, returned to her work at hand.

"It would please me greatly if you completed you statement," he goaded.

She looked up, a playful curl on her lip. "Look who's curious now."

He said nothing, but found returning to his work infinitely more difficult. His train of thought had been derailed.

"Fine," she said, seeming to relent. She looked at him. He was already looking at her. "You aren't like the others, Sheldon."

"I know," he said.

"No," she said, rising and walking over to him. "You aren't like anyone. I confess, when I first came to this job, I'd heard tales of an impossible mad scientist who terrorized his colleagues."

"A rather unflattering portrait," he said, turning away.

"And one that's undeserved."

He looked back at her.

"In reality," she continued, "you have been the single best part of my affiliation with this project."

Sheldon was taken at the statement. "So, then, you disagree with my detractors?"

"I came here wanting to prove myself, Sheldon, but working alongside you has been an inspiration. I now realize that dismissing you like everyone else would be a waste of an opportunity." Her face grew serious and determined, and her eyes turned to his—coy but unwavering. "I want to be your pupil, Sheldon. I want to inherit your wisdom. I want to learn at your feet. Will you let me?"

Sheldon turned away pensively. "Historically, I work alone."

"Don't worry," she said. "All I want to do is watch."

Without another word, she rose and walked back to her seat and continued to work in silence. When she looked up a minute later, Sheldon snapped his head back to his computer as if he'd still been watching her. She smiled a little to herself.

She had him where she wanted him.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Rumor has it that Sheldon's going bald.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"With all due respect Dr. Seibert, I hope this meeting will be a short one," Sheldon said, settling into a chair. "My to-do list is riddled with a long list of matters, all urgent."

"But this matter supersedes them all," Dr. Siebert said, rather seriously. "Have a seat."

Then it dawned on Sheldon: this was the meeting.

"We ask for total and complete honesty in regards to the professional lives of our faculty and staff at this university."

"And you have mine," Sheldon said.

"Then you should easily be able to explain this," he said. He lifted a few pages that were stapled together and slid them over to Sheldon. Sheldon scanned the papers, reading hurriedly, and certain passages jumped out: "June 13, 1993," "Galveston, Texas," "Mary Cooper—mother," "storage permits."

Dr. Siebert took the stack, squinted at the pages, then pointed to a particular spot. "Read that."

"Attempted illegal acquisition of yellow cake uranium," Sheldon read. He looked up and shrugged. "So?"

"So," Dr. Seibert explained, "this little incident may cost you your visa."

Leonard burst into Sheldon's office and shut the door behind him. Sheldon lifted his head and looked at Leonard. Leonard was glaring back at him.

"If you are here to make my life difficult I'm afraid you've arrived too late," Sheldon said, turning his attention back to his computer.

Leonard leaned forward, whispering loudly. "Ever since we got back from Washington, DC, something's been different with you. First, you were happy on the plane ride home, then you were actually smiling at your Sloppy Joe that day in the cafeteria, and finally you missed dinner last night."

Sheldon returned, nonplussed, to his work. "I would ask you how that random list of items is connected—if I cared."

"It depends," Leonard answered to the question Sheldon didn't ask. "Why is Lise-Marie calling you at home?" he asked pointedly.
Sheldon snapped back to his friend's direction. "Why that is any of your business?" he replied defensively.

"So you don't deny it," Leonard said.

"How would you have even the foggiest idea who calls me and where?"

Leonard produced a crumpled slip of paper. "I saw this number in your caller ID last night under the name 'Unknown' and recognized that the area code was from Washington, DC. I normally wouldn't have paid it any attention, except you've been so weird lately."

"Weird is not bad, Leonard," he said. "Weird is what distinguishes the great from the mundane."

Leonard ignored the comment. "A quick Google search showed that this number is registered under the Swiss Embassy. I put two and two together and realized… you're hiding something."

"I hope that you have a theory to go with that rather bland discovery," Sheldon replied.

"When a man is sneaky about a woman at work, one of two things are happening: he's either having an affair or… well he's usually having an affair."

The accusation pushed Sheldon from his chair. "How dare you even suggest such a thing?"

"I know you're not having an affair… are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what the hell is going on?"

Sheldon's eyes were darting around, and he looked like he was about to jump out of his skin. His reaction only encouraged Leonard further. He drew closer, leading with his finger.

"There is something going on."

"There is nothing going on," Sheldon said, returning to his seat and then typing with a little too much gusto.

"Then who were you with last night?" Leonard pleaded. Sheldon didn't answer. "And don't give me that crap about being by yourself. A theorist can work in a janitor's closet. You'd never stay at the office that late if you weren't with someone."

Sheldon pulled his lips into a straight line. "I am under the strictest orders not to divulge the nature of my business with the University."

"With the University?" Leonard repeated, shocked. "This has to do with the University?"

Sheldon sighed at the slip. "I can't have this conversation. I consider it terminated."

Leonard looked at the door and considered leaving, then back at Sheldon, who was fidgeting with a pencil; his eye was twitching. Leonard didn't want to miss this opportunity while he had it. He had to think fast.

"Well then I guess the rumors are true," he said.

Sheldon looked up. "Which rumors?"
"The ones that say you're going bald."

"Going bald?" Sheldon said, appalled.

"Yeah," Leonard said, nodding. "Why else would you be spending so much time with the Swiss heiress?"

"I'm not spending so much time with anyone," Sheldon said. "And I see no connection between her and these baseless lies about the condition of my follicles."

"So you mean to tell me you don't know that Lise-Marie's father is a famous baldness doctor. Yeah, he's the guy behind Fogaine. It's the knock-off of Rogaine. He made a fortune in Europe." He wanted to laugh, but bit the inside of his jaw. He had to sell it. He had to sell it.

Sheldon, however, wasn't buying.

"Lise-Marie's father was a welder. He is a humble man and an amateur scientist."

"Huh?" Leonard said, growing excited. "How do you know that?"

"I will not submit to your interrogation any longer. I hate to say this, Leonard, but leave my office at once."

"Fine," Leonard said, slowing strolling to the door. "But I live across the hall from you. You can't hide from me."

When he was gone, Sheldon balled up his fists and growled in some facsimile of the Hulk. Just then his phone rang. It was Amy.

"I'm very nearly on the verge of imploding, Amy," he said. "Gablehauser, and apparently the Swiss government, found out about my nuclear reactor from when I was thirteen. Leonard just stormed my office sniffing around about the project, and deadlines and expectations flood my inbox like Stormtroopers on a wayward planet."

"Um, hello?" Amy said.

"Hello, Amy," he said, realizing his failure to provide her a proper greeting.

"First: the yellow cake uranium situation occurred when you were a minor, and you never actually possessed any. I assure you the matter will be resolved."

"You don't know that," Sheldon said.

"And you don't know that it won't be. But my scenario is just as plausible, and considerably less likely to induce a stroke."

It was a sound enough argument.

"Next," Amy continued, "you are a terrible liar—"

"No worse than you," he muttered.

"However, while our mutual tendency to be honest is what makes us exemplary among our social group, it leads to a certain fascination, on their part, with our personal lives, much like a reclusive rock star attracts the rabid attention of the public."
"Indeed," Sheldon said, heartily agreeing.

"Rather than lying, you are much better off using methods more suited to your skill set: lies by omission and truthful diversion. Tell Leonard what you can tell him, thus satisfying his need for information while omitting anything that would lead to an actual divulgence of information."

Sheldon nodded to himself. "A brilliant strategy, Amy."

"As far as your inbox is concerned, do only what you must do and delegate the rest. You have a team for a reason."

Sheldon sat up erect and confident for the first time all day. "Indeed you are right, Amy. My abilities, while impressive, have their limits." He sighed. "I'm glad I called you. Thank you for your advice. See you later." He went to hang up when he heard Amy screaming his name on the other line. He returned the phone to his ear. "Was there something else?"

"I called you!" she reminded him.

"Indeed you did. Was there something you wanted to say?"

"Naturally," she replied. "I wanted to let you know that I got a call from Dr. Cramden. She offered me the job at Caltech."

Sheldon's face beamed. "Superb news, though wholly expected."

"Thank you. It feels so good to know my skills as a scientist are still desired."

"So," Sheldon asked. "When do you start?"

"Well, I told her I had to speak with you first."

"Of course, and you know you have my enthusiastic blessing."

"Besides, I wanted to wait for the other interview to clear. Just to be sure."

Sheldon was baffled at this addition. "Are you referring to the second interview you were offered at Pasadena University?"

"I am. It's coming up soon and Dr. Cramden said she would give me a time to think it over."

"But Amy, the difference between the Biology departments at Caltech and Pasadena's is like the difference between an expedition to the Amazon and an ant colony bought online."

"Not only do I disagree with that statement, but it omits a key part of my decision. Pasadena is considering me based purely on my own merit as a researcher. Caltech is an excellent institution, but Pasadena could be my opportunity to develop a program from the ground up."

Sheldon could not follow her reasoning and was agitated to the point of distraction. He wanted Amy with him at Caltech and that was the only scenario he could really consider. To see it deferred to a second-rate, regional university was maddening. "Well that's..." he bit his tongue, fighting back words like "crazy," "foolish" and "poopy-headed." He took too long.

"I don't care if you think my decision is crazy, foolish, or poopy-headed," Amy said. "I owe it to myself to explore all my options. And I hope I can count on you to support me in that."

"I'll see you tonight," Sheldon said and hung up.
Penny was sitting on the bed, staring at her cell phone and learning (re-learning) a very important lesson: planning to do something and actually doing it were two very different things.

They were really only a series of numbers: fives, and eights and ones and twos. But on the other side of those numbers was the woman who had probably had the biggest impact on her life, even when she wasn't there.

Darlene. Her mother.

Then again, Penny wasn't even sure that she wanted to call her. Was Penny's mind even made up?

She leaned back against the headboard and sighed.

"God, give me a sign!" she cried to the heavens. A moment later, her baby kicked three times in a row. "Hmm," she said, and sat up, content that this was sign enough. She pushed send.

After five rings, Penny could hear the sound of a voice on the other side of the line, but… the person wasn't talking to her.

"Hello?" Penny said, or maybe asked.

"Take the dog outside!" the other woman screamed. "Get it out of the kitchen… You know I hate that… Right there... Right there..." Then she suddenly turned her attention to the little communication device that was surely in her hand. "Hello?" she said, her voice welcoming and bright.

"Hello, Mom."

She didn't respond for a moment. "Who is this?"

"Penny."

"Penny!" she called with joy and yearning. "How are you, sweetie?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Penny answered, a smile coming across her own face. "How are you?"

"I'm doing great. How did you get my number?"

"From Scooter," Penny answered. Scooter was her brother. "He said he got it from you at the hearing."

"The hearing," she said, with considerably less cheer. "You don't know how close your brother came to going to jail. Thank God, your father put in $900 and I was able to get the other $300. Well, actually, Rich paid the other $300." Since the divorce from Penny's dad, Rich had been Darlene's on-again, off-again boyfriend who basically created more problems than he solved. Penny was sorry to hear he was back in the picture. "I'm going to pay him back, though, as soon as I get my settlement."

"Settlement?" Penny asked.

"Yeah, sweetie. Over the summer I got in an accident on a city bus and my neck has not been right since. I'm looking at least five grand in damages."

Penny had heard enough. "Mom, you can't keep bailing Scooter out of everything. He's a father, almost 40 years old, and still he hasn't learned a damn thing all these years because he always gets
away with everything."

"Look, Penny," Darlene countered, "I know he's just your brother, but he's my son. It's harder than it looks seeing someone you brought in the world suffer. Besides, everyone needs a break now and then. Lord knows I do." She sighed. "I need a break so bad, Penny."

But Penny found herself thinking about what her mom said about being a mother.

"Mom? I have some news."

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Then out with it."

This was it. This was her moment. "I'm about to be a mom. Leonard and I are expecting."

There was a moment of silence, then…

"Yeah, I know, sweetie," her mom said. It wasn't the reply Penny expected.

"If you knew, then why didn't you call?"

"Oh, Penny," Darlene said, "I didn't have your number. You know how absent-minded I am. I've lost my doggone phone four times since we've talked last."

"But you could have asked Scooter. Or dad."

"I imagine I could have," she said with a shrug in her voice, "but I hate bothering them. Besides, your dad's girlfriend was so rude to me at the hearing. You would have thought I was the one on trial."

Penny thought a minute. There was something she really wanted to ask, and she gave herself a moment to gather her courage.

"Mom, I was wondering if," —deep breath— "You know, the baby's due in a few weeks, and Leonard and I would love for you to be there. We'd pay for your trip out here, of course. All you'd have to do is come."

There was a long silence, and with each passing second, Penny's heart sunk a little more. She had her answer before her mother had even spoken a word.

"You know there's nothing else in the world I want more than to be out there with you guys, sweetie," she said. "But you know with this neck injury I can't fly until I get better. Doctor's orders, of course. Plus, I could never take money from you that should be going that grandbaby of mine."

Penny almost protested that it would be no trouble at all, or that her mother could take the train, or that they could pay for her to drive a rental car out to California. She even considered saying Rich could come. But she didn't in the end because… who even knew the real reason her mother wasn't coming. She could be on parole for writing bad checks. She could have been embarrassed about how she was living. She was almost certainly out of money. There was always another excuse, another reason why she couldn't be there. The thought of it made Penny angry, and she couldn't even quite remember why she thought it would be different this time… why she'd bothered calling in the first place. She wanted to let her mom know how much she really needed her and how much
she'd let her down.

"Mom," she began, with pointed words on the tip of her tongue, but it felt like someone else was taking over as she started to speak. "Remember that time, before you and Dad split up? That time you made me that celebration pie?"

"I do," she said. "When we thought you were going to be the head cheerleader at your school."

"Yeah, that time," Penny said. "The pie had all the school colors from Omaha High on it."

"Yep. I had to put food coloring in the crust."

"I remember. But, in the end, Valerie Mossbacher got head cheerleader instead."

"I know." Her mother snorted. "Old slutbag."

Penny laughed a little, and when she did her bottom lip began to tremble and a tear ran down her face. She swatted at it, and swallowed hard. "I don't know why, but I just think about that sometimes, that's all." Her breath caught towards the end, and her mother seemed to notice.

"Oh, Penny," she said softly, her voice tender. "I love you so much."

"I know," Penny said.

"And I'm sorry," she said.

"I know," Penny said.

There was a bark in the background. Penny heard shuffling on the other side of the phone.

"Rich! I told you I want that damn mutt out of my kitchen… Take him outside. I don't care where... You calm down!" She came back to the phone. "I have to go Penny," she said.

"Okay, Mom."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Penny answered.

"Send me a lot of pictures," she said.

"Okay."

"I love you," she said again, and hung up.

Penny pressed the phone to her chest and sat a while, letting the aftermath of the moment sink in. After a while, she climbed down from the bed and waddled into the living room where Leonard had fallen asleep on the couch while watching an infomercial on magic hedge clippers. She sat down next to him, lifting his foot out of the way. He woke up.

"What time is it?" he asked, rubbing his eye.

"Seven twenty-two," she said.

He stretched, and then sat up and leaned on the armrest. "God, why am I so sleepy?" he asked. He turned to Penny and caught the melancholy look in her eye. It startled him. "Are you crying?" he
asked.

She shrugged. Another tear came down her face.

"Come here," he said and pulled her into a hug. "What happened?"

"I called Darlene," she said.

"Really?" he said sitting back and looking at Penny's face. "What did she say?"

"She said she loves me," Penny said.

Leonard waited for more explanation, but when none came he was confused. "That's all?"

"That's all that matters," Penny said. "I'm not worrying about the rest."

Leonard nodded, not really knowing all the details, but somehow still managing to understand everything. He embraced her again.

"Penny, we're going to have this baby, you and me," he said, and he could feel her nodding under his chin. "And we're going to kick-ass as parents." She nodded more. "And we're going to love each other forever." More nodding. "And our baby is going to be smart and beautiful." She laughed.

She placed a hand on her belly, pressing down gently until she could feel the baby that was growing inside of her, and was rewarded with the movement of a little foot.

"She's awake," Penny said. Leonard slid his hand under hers to feel what she was feeling. They sat a moment, marveling at their daughter. Penny suddenly felt very complete with just the three of them.

"I love you, Leonard," she finally said.

"I love you, too," he replied, and pressed a kiss against her temples. She met his eyes, and they shared a kiss.

It was going to be okay.

Routines are sometimes calculated, borne of well-crafted practices designed to improve productivity, preserve tradition or facilitate order in daily life. Others rise out of something looser and more tacit: an unofficial conversation, a lazy habit, a casual convenience. This routine, however, fell somewhere between the two: a need for stealth with her role among their colleagues and the magnetic pull of the physicist down the hall. These combined factors meant that Lise-Marie was making her, now daily, pilgrimage to Sheldon's office at 6:30, after the bulk of the students and professors were deep in their offices, at home with their families or somewhere else entirely. She rapped on his door and, not waiting for him to answer, walked in.

She was usually greeted with a casual nod and cordial "hello," but this evening was different. At the sight of her, he jumped from his chair. The reaction startled her.

"What time is it?" he asked, shuffling papers.

"Have you somewhere to go?" she asked.

"I, um," he looked at her, and she looked back at him with what he took to be sincere concern. The
truth was, he had a family waiting for him at home that he had to get to, but frilly domestic chitchat was the last thing he wanted to introduce to their relationship. "I have to go," he said. He started shoving things into his messenger bag.

She nodded and slowly drew closer, diverting her eyes and dragging her fingertip along the length of his desk as she did. "That's disappointing," she said. "I thought we would be going over your summations on the Bracken submission."

Sheldon froze, standing erect. "I did commit to that."

She nodded. "I was really looking forward to it."

He sighed. "I was as well." He almost relented, but then there was Amy… and the children. "I might be able to schedule a… or perhaps we could, no… or on second thought—."

"Go home," she said. "I know your daughter is waiting for her daddy. I would hate for her to have to wait."

The mention of Aditi made Sheldon uncomfortable. He picked up his bag and headed for the door without saying anything.

"There is a way you can make it up to me," she said. He turned around. "Come to my party."

"Party?" he said.

"Remember? The department soiree I'm having on Friday. While I admit that I would very much enjoy your company, I confess I have an ulterior motive for persisting in inviting you: your presence will be quite a draw. Despite your humble belief otherwise, you are really admired here. Your attendance would lend a certain gravitas to the event."

Sheldon nodded. "Then consider this my RSVP," he said.

She smiled widely, and then made a check mark in the air. "Noted," she said.

He left. She followed a moment later.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Time is Love – Josh Turner
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

It's a pickle on a mayonnaise jar!

Sheldon got to work and was greeted to this email:

Subject: LHC concerns  
From: Gablehauser, Eric  
To: Cooper, Sheldon  
CC: Seibert, Ronald; Haskins, Franklin; lise-marie . zurbriggen cern . ch  
Date: 08/01/19 09:13:07.365 AM

Dear Dr. Cooper,

There will be a teleconference of the LHC, the local project faculty and Attorney Fineman tomorrow. It will be held in the Presidential boardroom at 8:30 AM, to accommodate the nine-hour time difference between California and Switzerland. Your attendance is MANDATORY and your confidentiality, as always, is of utmost importance.

Sincerely,
Dr. Gablehauser

Sheldon stared at his monitor with renewed aggravation. The tenuous optimism he fought to maintain had crumbled in the span of 55 words, and was replaced with anger… and fear. And the fear only made him angrier.

He was glaring at his monitor when his office phone rang. He forced himself to answer.

"Sheldon Cooper," he said tersely.

"This is Lise-Marie," the other voice said. "You probably noticed that I was cc'd on that email."

"You are cc'd on many emails I receive. You'll have to be more specific."

"The one we got about three minutes ago."

Sheldon looked through his inbox and had only received two emails in the last three minutes: the aforementioned one from Gablehauser and a forward from Raj on 'The Top Ten Reasons Amazing Race is still the Best Reality Show.' Lise-Marie had only been cc'd on the former.

"Very well then," Sheldon said. "You must be referring to an email with the subject line 'LHC concerns.'"

"I am," she said.

There was a pause. Sheldon grew impatient.
"Should I anticipate further calls every time you are simply cc'd on my emails or did you call with a purpose?"

"A purpose, of course. Are you aware of the… topic of tomorrow's meeting?"

"Unfortunately, I am," Sheldon said. "Are you?"

"I'm… I'm afraid I am as well," she said. "I figured that Dr. Seibert could only stall the LHC for so long before they would start demanding answers. Only, I didn't imagine it would be so soon." She thought she would have at least another month to justify her position before the LHC would call her back to Switzerland. With more time, she was sure she could have justified her presence on the team—through any means possible. However, this meeting was looking like the end of her journey at Caltech.

"So soon is right," Sheldon agreed. "The logistics of working between two international facilities takes time."

"Indeed they do," she said. "Going in, it was my anticipation that I would be working with you for the duration of the project, but apparently they are considering—," she stopped there, too upset to utter the words.

This was alarming to Sheldon. "Please don't tell me they are considering personnel changes?" he said. He had no desire to co-lead with someone remotely located in Switzerland. He'd rather quit physics altogether than, ugh, share.

"Actually," she replied, "there have been talks of flat-out dismissal from the project." She realized her neck was on the chopping block.

"I refuse to believe that," he said, his voice rising. "After such an exhaustive search, how dare they dismiss someone so arbitrarily?"

Lise-Marie noted the ire in his voice, and hastened to calm him down. She was honestly flattered that her potential dismissal bothered him so.

"Don't become cross, Sheldon," she said. "Perhaps we can devise a strategy or a way to ensure that our current team is not compromised. I really do enjoy working with you," she said.

"Thank you," he replied. "I would hate for you to have to miss the opportunity of enriching your own career under my tutelage."

She was less flattered by that statement, but she reminded herself that Sheldon was Sheldon. "I would hate to miss that opportunity as well," she said, with all the faux sincerity she could muster. "How about we have a talk over lunch? There's an Indian restaurant not five minutes from here."

"I'm afraid I have a previous lunch engagement," he said.

She nodded to herself. "That's fine. I'll stop by later," she said, and hung up.

Sheldon shrugged. He had no idea what she believed she could do to assist in clearing his juvenile record, and he honestly wasn't keen on hearing her suggestions. He privately hoped she wouldn't come.

Three hours later, Sheldon stood outside of a brick building (replete with columns and a stately portico), and looked up at the marble lettering overhead: Jaime Escalante Charter School. Having
confirmed he was in the right place, he locked up Enrico on the bike stand just outside the main door and went in. The school—in all its dimensions—seemed smaller than he had imagined. He spotted the sign that indicated the Main Office and, upon entering, found Amy standing there with another woman… and the twins.

"Amy," he called to her, drawing closer. She turned around at the sound of her name and reached out her hand.

"Daddy!" the twins squealed, and they both ran up and hugged Sheldon's legs.

"This is Dr. Sheldon Cooper," Amy said in introduction to the woman at her right. "Sheldon, this is Dr. Cass. She's the Assistant Dean."

Dr. Cass and Sheldon exchanged handshakes. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Cooper. Your children are delightful."

"I like to think so," he replied. Amy cut him a look. "Thank you," he added.

Dr. Cass smiled widely. "So, shall we begin the tour?"

With a communal nod, they set off out of the door and down the hall. All four walked the halls together, linked hand in hand: Robert, then Amy, then Aditi, then Sheldon. Dr. Cass kept a brisk pace, and the four of them lagged behind somewhat.

"You look really sweaty," Amy told Sheldon over Aditi's head.

"It's hot outside," Sheldon explained.

"It wouldn't have bothered me to pick you up."

"I didn't mind taking the bike. It was only four miles."

Apparently, Dr. Cass caught the comment. "Ah, another motorcycle enthusiast," she said. "There are several parents of children here who belong to local biker clubs. You may know some."

"I was actually referring to a bicycle of the non-motorized variety," he clarified.

"Oh," Dr. Cass said. "Well, I'm sure we have many parents who use those as well."

Sheldon leaned in close to Amy, whispering this time. "I thought you weren't bringing the children."

"I wasn't, but Penny got a last-minute call to fill-in as Pregnant Lady #1 in a life insurance commercial. I couldn't find anybody else to watch them on such short notice." Before Sheldon could reply, Robert was tugging on her hand. She turned around.

"Mommy, I saw Prometheus when we walked past the library," he said. "I knew it was him because he was connected to a chain."

"Nicely done, Robert," she answered, smiling proudly.

Dr. Cass cast a glance over her shoulder at the young boy as she walked. "Very astute observation, young man," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "As an ancient character known to champion knowledge for the benefit of humankind, Prometheus is an apt figure to place outside of the library. Are you a fan of the classics?"
He looked up at his mother, a little stunned at being directly addressed, and possibly unsure of what "the classics" referred to. Amy patted his shoulder, and nodded reassuringly. She took the question.

"His father bought him a book on the Titans. He's had a minor passion for them ever since."

Dr. Cass nodded delightedly, then stopped walking and motioned toward a classroom door. "I wanted to start here, in one of our pre-school classrooms. So as not to interrupt, we'll just peek through the door."

Amy drew closer, and the twins crowded under her on tiptoe, peering through the glass at the children stirring inside. Sheldon stood just behind them, looking over Amy's shoulder. The teacher raised her hand and all the children scurried to the front of the room, sitting on mats at the front of the classroom.

"She's going to read the children a story?" she asked.

"Likely. I believe they're in a lesson on selected shorts from Persian literature. *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* remains a perennial favorite," Amy stole a glance at Sheldon; he was looking at her as well. "We keep our class sizes small," Dr. Cass explained. "Between six and ten students to a teacher—never to exceed twelve—and each elementary class has an aide as well. Inside these walls, the students benefit from a multidisciplinary curriculum centered on the play model favored by children in that age group."

Amy nodded, liking what she heard.

"Let's move on," Dr. Cass said after a while, and led them down the hall.

Amy and Sheldon, with their children in tow, followed her again, perusing their environment as they went. It was tastefully decorated and invariably immaculate.

"You have a beautiful building here," Amy said.

"Thank you. It is maintained by an outside custodial service, and a renowned landscaping team similarly maintains the grounds. Much of the artwork on the walls has been donated by local artists and children's illustrators." She paused in front of another classroom, unlocking the door with a key. "Now, the class who typically occupies this room in Music class at the moment, so we can go inside." She turned on the light.

The twins rushed past their parents and Dr. Cass, only to amble about the room with barely-contained curiosity. The toys, activity centers, computers, tables, art supplies and other trappings all earned their silent wonder, and their clear desire to jump right in was tempered only by their mother's watchful eyes just feet away.

"Every room is equipped with a minimum of six computers," Dr. Cass explained, "each one loaded with age-appropriate software in the areas of Language—those languages being English, Spanish and Chinese—Math, World History, Science and what we call cognitive development: spatial exercises, word problems, logic puzzles and the like."

"If it's pre-school, aren't there literacy concerns?" Amy asked.

"Escalante boasts a perennial 100-percent literacy rate, even among our population of three year olds. Most of our pupils, as you're probably familiar with, read several grade levels ahead of their actual age."
Amy was astounded at this detail. She looked at Sheldon. He didn't say anything, but she couldn't miss the quiet awe on his face.

"Let's proceed to the playground," Dr. Cass said, locking the door behind them. As they walked down the halls, they occasionally stopped for brief introductions to the student gym, the cafeteria, the auditorium and the art studio. Every facility they encountered boasted state-of-the-art equipment, novel learning tools and exceptional teachers.

Eventually they reached a corridor that led to the recess area behind the building. After exiting through a set of double doors, Sheldon and Amy found the grounds to be exactly as promised: manicured and featuring varied vegetation and plant life.

"We have four recreation zones that have been catered to specific age groups: Pre-K and K, first through second, third and fourth, and fifth and sixth. Our educational program ends there. The playground is designed to not only be physically challenging, but a welcoming place for physical activity. Many children of exceptional intelligence avoid outdoor play due to neighborhood bullies, an affinity for indoor activities and parents who minimize the importance of physical activity. Many of our Phys Ed teachers also have degrees in childhood education or child psychology and use this training to foster an enriching outdoor experience."

Aditi and Robert wiggled in their parents arms.

"What do you think?" Dr. Cass asked.

It was all so, so wonderful.

"We are very impressed," Amy answered. She turned to Sheldon. "Very impressed."

He nodded.

Amy felt someone tugging on her skirt. She looked down at Aditi.

"Do you learn about livestock at this school?" she asked.

Amy glanced at Dr. Cass then back at Aditi. "I believe so, yes," she answered simply.

"Good. I like learning bout livestock," she said, quite earnestly, as if she were seriously considering a career in Agriculture. "Moo!" she added for good measure.

Dr. Cass chuckled at that. "Your children ask very fascinating questions," she said.

Amy nodded. "I am afraid they are responsible for the occasional non-sequitor."

"It's nothing to be afraid of. Such observations are typical of gifted children," she said. Sheldon smiled slyly at this assertion. "Feel free to walk the grounds," Dr. Cass offered. "You can return to the Main Office for a quick meeting with the principal when you're ready." She walked back inside.

Amy and Sheldon walked off together, getting a better look of the outdoor equipment. The jungle gym included a giant abacus.

"Can we play Mommy?" Aditi asked.

"Yes, but only for a few minutes," she said. The two kids took off, as Sheldon and Amy watched on.
"I hope I didn't speak too soon when I said you were impressed," Amy said.

"No," Sheldon said, "I *am* impressed. This school is 'impressive' in every detail. Nothing like this existed in Texas when I was a child, and if it did, we likely wouldn't have been able to afford it."

Amy nodded. "I might have benefited from a school like this one as well. It certainly would have beaten spending so much time alone and suffering from hours on end of name-calling and tireless efforts to render me nude in public."

He nodded in agreement.

Amy could see that despite the glow in his words, his facial expression betrayed that something else was nagging at him. He was looking off in the distance, pensive.

"You seem to be… preoccupied by something," she said. She half-expected him to respond with a comment about how unfortunate it was that Aditi couldn't attend. To be honest, she'd been wrestling with it as well. "Are you okay, Sheldon?"

He turned to her briefly, then back out into the distance.

"It's the law of numbers, Amy."

She tried to catch his meaning. "The idea that any particular extraordinary event cannot be predicted since the ordinary is statistically more likely to occur?"

"The very one," Sheldon said. "One can't have it all. To believe otherwise is to willingly fall victim to human folly."

She knew Sheldon well enough to know that when confronted with a particularly cruel challenge, his confidence tended to wane, but this bout of pessimism, standing outside a ridiculously exclusive school that their son was about to attend for free was, frankly, pissing her off.

"So which of us should give up?" she asked, crossing her arms. "Maybe Aditi should settle for one of those second-rate babysitters you complain about. Maybe Robert should fold—his intelligence is creating too many problems. Or maybe me. Why am I trying to go back to work so soon anyway? Right?"

He turned to her, and she was surprised to see he was confused by her response. He shook his head. "Amy, there's nothing extraordinary about the offers you've been getting. They'd be crazy not to be fighting over you."

It was a heartening reply, and he meant it sincerely. Still, this only left one question.

"Then what are you talking about?" she said.

"There's a meeting tomorrow," he said. "A visa meeting."

And that's when she realized that the person he was worrying about was himself. Not one to hide his troubles, he often ranted and raved about brands of soaps and the timing of crosswalk signals, but the things that really bothered him weren't always as close to the surface.

"Simply holding a meeting is not necessarily bad," she said hopefully. He shook his head.

"The tone of the email I received would suggest otherwise." He sighed. "Besides, my 'babysitter' has informed me that there have been talks of personnel changes."
Amy shook her head. "That can't be. They searched so long before choosing you."

"I said the same thing."

"I said the same thing." He was growing more despondent with each passing second.

"Listen to me," she said tugging on his arm. He looked down at her, begging with his eyes for whatever reassurance she could give. "Don't be blinded by what you've convinced yourself is the magic bullet to all your life's ambitions. The law of numbers applies to simple experiments with random outcomes, but there is nothing simple or random about your talents or your goals. Let tomorrow bring what it may. Regardless of what transpires, you can still do great things, Sheldon."

He looked back her, trying to be comforted, trying to believe. Robert ran up crashing into Sheldon, and Aditi caught up a second later.

"I win! I win!" Robert chanted.

"I almost won," Aditi said, still bouncing around.

"You ready to go?" Amy asked her brood.

"NO!" they said in unison.

"No matter," she said. "We have to say goodbye to the head dean and then have lunch!" she said enthusiastically. Aditi just pulled at the collar of her shirt.

"I'm hot," she said, with a bit of a dramatic flair.

Sheldon swooped her up; she put her head against his shoulder. He brushed her bangs, slick with sweat against her forehead.

"Bet I can beat you to the door," Robert said and took off. Aditi, giggled hysterically and kicked her legs, wordlessly pleading to be put down, and as soon as Sheldon placed her feet to the ground she took off. Their parents took their time following behind them.

"There's a party we have been invited to attend on Friday," he announced as they ambled to the building.

"Work related?"

He nodded.

"At the hotel?"

"No, Lise-Marie is hosting it at her home. I'm under the impression it's a catered affair," he said. "I believe we will have to dress up."

Amy nodded, smiling. "Very nice."

Sheldon stayed at work longer than he intended. Spending just one hour away from the office seemed to lengthen his day by several more. The added distraction of the imminent meeting did little to improve his efficiency. He was taking a mental health break at website about international flags when there was a verbal knock on the door.

"Knock, knock," Lise-Marie called, then walked right in. He hadn't realized his office door had been left open. "Are you busy?" she asked.
"I would have gone home by now if I weren't," he said.

"Fair enough," she said, entering without invitation. "I only ask because I am interested to know how flags play into your research," she said, a sardonic tone in her voice.

He squirmed some, minimizing the window. "How may I help you?" he asked.

"As promised, I stopped by for our tete-a-tete," she said. "Project Keep the Team Intact." She smiled, rather pleased with herself. "It's a working title."

"And a worthy pursuit on paper," Sheldon said. "But I'm beginning to wonder if this fight is worth my while," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, great science can be performed anywhere, regardless of one's location."

Lise-Marie wondered what had brought about this change of heart, and considering that she only had a tenth of the reputation he did, it seemed like a smug thing to say. It was as if he suddenly didn't care if she were on the team or not.

"Maybe," she said, hoping to work him back to previous convictions, "but is it not also important with whom one works?"

Sheldon shrugs. "For some scientists perhaps, but Einstein and Newton often did their greatest work alone."

Since she was fairly sure he would never compare her to such men, it suddenly dawned or that he may have switched to talking about himself.

"You aren't thinking of leaving the project are you?" If so, she was all but cut from the team.

"Leaving? No. But my attachment wanes as the administrative duties and the political concerns increase."

She quickly went through a catalog of her most persuasive arguments to keep him on board: Robert Oppenheimer only published five papers in his life and worked with others to make his discoveries known; the international fame (infamy?) of the Manhattan Project; the phenomenon of the very internet he was so enamored of. But there was one cherished thing that she could use to persuade him more effectively than anything else:

His ego.

"There's one thing you're forgetting," she said solemnly.

"What might that be?" he said.

"Regardless of whether or not you need this project," she paused for effect, "this project needs you."

It was if he were hearing it again for the first time. "Needs me," he repeated without question. It's was a promising start.

"Yes," she said, growing fervor. "Needs you. They combed the nation looking for theorist of a higher caliber and emerged with one name: Sheldon Cooper. To forsake this task would be tantamount to forsaking your country."

He seemed to perk up at this conclusion, but there was a question in his eye.
"You are not an American. I find it hard to believe such a statement of patriotism on your part."

At this statement, she pulled out all the stops. She grabbed a chair, bringing it closer to him and sat down. "Sheldon," she said. "When you first came on this project, Dr. Lively no doubt told you what he told me. That the goal of this project wasn't just to do great science. But also…” she stopped, allowing him to finish the statement.

"To change the world," he said.

"I am a citizen of that world. We need you," she said.

She saw the words sink in and, for the first time since she'd known him, she saw a sincere moment of earnestness dawn on his face. It seemed like a good time to ask a question that would affect how she would proceed with securing her own ambitions.

"How do you see me as a scientist?" she asked.

Sheldon thought a moment, as she thought he would. "You are capable in many respects," he said.

"Just capable?" she asked.

"You're a fine scientist with suitable passion and dedication to your work."

It was a rather bland remark, far from the effusive recommendation she was hoping for. Then, out of the blue he added this.

"You've certainly been useful to me in many critical ways. Essential, even."

Had she heard correctly? "Essential ways, you said?"

He pondered the word and nodded. "Yes, essential ways."

"So then I am essential to the project," she said.

Sheldon was losing interest with this verbal wordplay. He turned his head down, addressing his work again. "I imagine you can extrapolate that meaning from my words. Yes."

"Excellent," she said, rising and walking for the door. "Hold that thought."

"I have an eidetic memory," Sheldon said. "I hold all of my thoughts."

"Good," she said, and left.

After a long day at work, Bernadette emerged from her evening bath feeling rejuvenated and refreshed. In recent months she'd learned that there was little that a soak in the tub couldn't fix. She was scrubbing her wet hair with a towel and walking down the hall when she saw Howard leaning against the doorjamb of the kitchen.

"Last one in the bedroom and out of their clothes is a rotten egg," she giggled, then scampered over to give him a hug from behind when she saw Raj sitting at the kitchen table.

"I'd love to play," he replied, "but I could never live with myself if I betrayed by best friend by defiling his wife and her bathrobe."

"I thought you were leaving, Raj, when I went into the bathroom," she said.
"I was," he replied, bearing a toothy, goofy smile, "and then I had a taste for tea with saltine crackers. Your husband was very kind to oblige."

"Actually," Howard said, "you just kind of walked in and started getting it yourself. Oh, and Bernadette, he polished off your wine coolers. And reordered the spice rack. And drew a picture of a penis on the mayonnaise. You might want to kid-proof that before you make tomorrow's lunches."

"Why would you draw a penis on our mayonnaise?" Bernadette asked.

"Get it? A pickle on a jar of mayo," Raj said, giggling uncontrollably. "I crack myself up."

"Where were you when all this was happening?" she asked Howard.

"Trying to convince 911 not to press charges against us for prank calling them with 'an emergency case of a broken heart.' You really missed the waterworks."

"HE HAS TO GO!" Bernadette whined, turning to her husband with a plaintive expression.

"On it," Howard said. He went to Raj, pulling him from where he was sitting, and started walking him to the door. "It's time for you to skedaddle."

"Hasn't he been drinking?" she asked.

"Of course, I have," Raj said. "How else would we be having this conversation?"

Howard just held up his keys. "That would be the reason why I'm taking him home."

"Okay," she said, resigning herself to the fact, "but be quick." They shared a peck on her lips and she followed him to the door, her hand on her husband's back. She opened the door for them and the two men fumbled their way out onto the porch. Raj became instantly enamored with the night sky.

"That constellation is Sagittarius and that constellation is Ursa Major and that constellation is Canes Venatici." He shook his head as if his next words were going to be "aw shucks." "I don't even know how I know all this stuff," he chuckled, very pleased with himself.

"Maybe because you're an astrophysicist?" Howard suggested. This was new information for Raj, apparently.

"That's why!" he cried, a bit too loudly, and started patting Howard on the chest. "That's why I keep you around."

"Here, do me a solid, Mr. Spaceman, and just… lean against this railing for sec. I have to ask Bernadette something."

"Ooh, ooh!" Raj said excitedly. "Let me guess. How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

Howard stared at him a moment before saying anything. "Why would I ask her that?"

"I don't know. I can't read your mind. I don't know what kind of things go on in that crazy head of yours."

He was really annoying when he was drunk. "Just… just stand here," Howard said, and took the steps back to where Bernadette was standing.
"What is it?" she asked.

"I meant to tell you that Raj invited me to a see a live speaker tomorrow with guess who?"

"Um, Khloe Kardashian?"

"Um, good guess, but no. It's a man."

"Lamar Odom?"

"No, no. Dmitri Rezinov. Remember? The Russian astronaut. I haven't seen or heard from him since the space station days. He's visiting NASA for a few days and Raj's Astrophysics department roped him into giving a lecture. I'm thinking about cutting out of work an hour early, and having a chin wag with the old bastard before the lecture."

"Chin wag?" she repeated. "Old bastard?"

"It's astronaut talk. We like ride each other."

"Right," Bernadette said.

"The point is I wanted to go and catch up with him."

"Yeah, absolutely," Bernadette said, touching his arm. "I'll just pick the boys up from daycare then."

"Yeah," Howard said, but the look on his face indicated there was more. "That's the thing."

"That's the thing… what?" she asked.

"I promised them that I would take them to the storytelling session at the library tomorrow after work. They're having some kind of Dr. Seuss marathon."

"So that means that now I have to take them," she said, not really asking.

Howard drew a little closer and pressed his hands together in front of him, almost prayerfully. "It would mean so much to them it you did."

She sighed and nodded a little, reluctance on her face.

"Look, Bernie, you can do this. You've been hanging out with them like some kind of mother, son, and son posse. This is just more of the same."

"Except that this in public, indoors with other kids."

"How is that different?"

"They may just get a little rowdy or…" She stopped. This was her job. She had to do this eventually. She took a hard breath. "Nevermind. I'll take them. It's no problem."

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yep. It's fine."

"Great." He kissed her on the lips slowly, holding her face in his hands like she liked. She kind of felt better about it. "Love you, Bernie," he whispered.

"I will. I just might leave him on the corner to dry out with the other winos," he quipped.

"Did somebody say Dr. Seuss?" Raj asked. "That Cat in the Hat guy was so awesome. Always eating green eggs and ham."

Howard rolled his eyes. "I'll be right back," he said then grabbed Raj's arms pulling him along as they stumbled their way to the car.

The following morning, Attorney Fineman, Dr. Gablehauser, Sheldon and Lise-Marie sat in the boardroom with the University's President. They were teleconferencing with their international legal team in LA, along with their collaborators in CERN. The meeting was… not going well.
The valence electrons of boron can be tricky.

Lise-Marie's "pep talk" with Sheldon the previous evening had only served half of her plan: it had made him feel indispensable to the team. However, she hadn't quite gotten around to convincing him of her own importance, and she had spent a sleepless night mulling over how to tackle the matter while combing through faded photo albums and an unfinished glass of wine. However, in her endless efforts to anchor herself to this project, she couldn't have prayed for a better scenario. After several minutes of listening to the lawyer explain what could only be called Sheldon's visa disaster, the true nature of this meeting began to dawn on her and she ventured to speak.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said. She could feel the eyes of the teleconferencing LHC reps beating down on her from the monitor on the wall. "Are you saying that Dr. Cooper may not be able to get clearance to visit the LHC because his name is on a nuclear security red flag list?"

"Well, not exactly," the attorney said, looking in her direction. "Despite the red flag, the considerable age of the 'crime,' the fact that he was never formally charged, and his lack of success in actually acquiring reactive material make it unlikely that his visa won't eventually be approved."

"If his visa approval is a foregone conclusion," Dr. Siebert reasoned, "then surely with your legal abilities the process can be expedited."

"The problem is... this is a foreign visa process. If this were a matter connected solely to a domestic legal matter, I would have more legal access. However, in this case, I have limited recourse."

Sheldon was exasperated.

"These so-called 'crimes' took place when I was a minor. Can't you have my records expunged? Erased? Pardoned? Stolen by a skilled ninja?"

"Even if I successfully sought an aggressive course of legal action now—and I assure you I will," the attorney said, "at this point, it's like trying to unring a bell."

Dr. Gablehauser ventured a statement directed to the LHC members on the teleconference. "Does the LHC have any qualms about Dr. Cooper working in their facility?"

"None at all," one of them answered. "As he is not employed by the LHC—and thus we need not concern ourselves with financial matters such as taxes—we only concern ourselves with his legal entry. His clearance with the LHC upon his arrival is assured."

This statement only inflamed Sheldon more. He turned back to Attorney Fineman.

"When can we expect to have a visa in hand?" he asked.

The attorney let out a deep sigh. Sheldon prepared for the worst. "We're looking at, optimistically, six to eight months. It could be longer."
Sheldon stood straight up. "Six to eight months?" he cried. "In a country the size of my bathtub how can the visa queue possible be that long?"

"Dr. Cooper!" the President said, embarrassed.

The attorney answered. "The queue is not the issue. It's the investigation that is so time consuming. An assessment must take place."

Sheldon was not subdued in the least. "My twins, who have not yet seen their fifth birthdays, could probably assess and approve the paperwork quicker."

"That is my country you are speaking of," Lise-Marie said calmly, yet clearly offended. "You should at least recognize that your own actions have brought us to this juncture."

Sheldon looked at her, only barely managing to rein in his tongue. He turned back to Attorney Fineman. "If we operate on the government's timeline, in eight months, much less a year, the team would have travelled there, run tests and returned, made all necessary connections with the team there, not to mention performed a large portion of the subsequent analysis. Meanwhile, I would have been completely precluded from the process."

The President agreed. "There must be a way to move this along in a more timely fashion."

The attorney shook his head. "If there is a way, I do not know of one. Please be assured, however, that my legal team is doing everything in its power to stay abreast of the situation and ensure that no more time is expended than what is absolutely necessary. Even exploring alternate methods of entry."

Sheldon began to pace the floor, shaking his head. One of the collaborators from the Collider spoke up.

"In the meantime, barring what would be a very fortunate turn of events, I would like to mention that the University President should submit a list of suitable alternates from your team that could replace Dr. Cooper if he is unavailable."

"I will be available," Sheldon declared.

The President gave him a halting glare, before returning his attention to the reps. "I will begin to compose that list immediately and have it to you… by the end of the week?"

"That is agreeable," the collaborator said, nodding. "On that note, we must go."

"Thank you for time," the President said. Everyone nodded and exchanged farewells. The screen went black.

Sheldon went blacker.

"This is a fine mess, indeed," he said, pacing the floor. "They'd rather rid themselves of me than follow through with due process."

"That's not entirely accurate," Dr. Seibert said rising. "Either way, my advice to you is to keep your nose clean and keep your fingers crossed. We are doing everything—"

But Sheldon interrupted, very upset. "How can I be sure that you are doing all you can when, as we speak, you are compiling a list of my so-called 'replacements?' As if that were even possible."
"Because," Seibert replied, "your absence could jeopardize our standing. They could transfer this entire operation to another university or even strip Caltech of our collaboration status."

"What about ME!" Sheldon hollered back, leaning, with both hands down, against the table. "I am incensed at the wanton nature in which you have ceded to their every demand! I have a lot professionally and personally riding on this. And I don't intend to let little bureaucrats masquerading as agents of science rob me of what is mine."

"Dr. Cooper, I will only say this once," the President said with a tone of reprimand. "You either calm down immediately or, as much as I am loath to do this, I will remove you from the research team immediately. NO individual is greater than the whole."

Begrudgingly Sheldon grew silent, then sat at the far end of the table, his arms crossed, his jaw set. They looked at each with a terse silence.

"I think you often forget that we are on the same team," the President added.

"A merit of little import considering my precarious standing." After another moment of silence he stood and stormed out of the room.

The remaining four (Seibert, Gablehauser, Lise-Marie and Attorney Fineman) all exchanged tense looks. Whatever diplomacy Dr. Siebert had left was all but gone.

He glared at the attorney first. "If you even have the slightest interest of continuing representing this University than I expect every legal avenue to be painstakingly explored and ruthlessly exhausted by you and your team—without exception."

The attorney looked at him with exasperation,

"Eric," he said, looking at Dr. Gablehauser. "Our investment has been too great and the potential benefit to this University is too immense to let—."

"I know, I know," Gablehauser interrupted, sighing from some profound depth.

"Then you know this project cannot get away from us. If you have to clone Sheldon to keep this thing on campus, that's what I expect you to do. In the meantime, I want that list on my desk by the end of business tomorrow. It'll be a show of good faith, if nothing else."

Then he turned to Lise-Marie. He didn't have to say a word; his look said it all.

"I'll talk him," she said, and hurried out the door.

She stood outside Sheldon's office a moment, preparing herself for the conversation ahead of her like a rookie prizefighter before a match with a veteran champion. Sheldon would be in no mood for a visitor, and she almost dreaded the dialogue waiting for her on the other side of that door. Yet, she couldn't lose sight of the fact that her duties on the project, her role here, and, in some ways, her future as a scientist were inextricably tied to Sheldon. If he got cut, so did she, and worse, she wouldn't have an illustrious career as a scientist to fall back on. A solution, however, was swimming in her head, but proposing it would be delicate. She knew she would only get one shot. And it was a Hail Mary.

She was still composing herself when Sheldon walked up from down the hall. He looked damp and red, and the edges of his hairline were wet, like maybe he had recently splashed his face with cold
water. He slowed a moment, staring at her and, without a word, opened the door and went in. He seemed to debate whether he was going to shut the door behind him, and then just decided he would. But she pressed her hand against the knob, stopping the door from shutting. Through the sliver in the door, he just glared back at her with a severe look of frustration, desperation and indecision.

"I'm... so sorry, Sheldon," she said in a pained voice. It was the wrong thing to say. He went to shut the door again. "WAIT!" she called. She looked down the hallway; she'd been louder than she'd meant to be. She turned back to him and spoke again, more softly this time. "This can be fixed."

"How?" he barked back. He wanted an answer and he wanted one immediately.

"Let me in," she said through gritted teeth. After a moment of deliberation he backed away from the door and walked over to his desk. She hurriedly entered, shutting the door and standing there. Without preface, she jumped right in.

"I would never have spoken out of turn during the meeting, but a solution came to mind as we were conversing."

"What's that?" Sheldon said, burying his head in his hand, barely repressing his irritation.

"Before I tell you, however, I should warn you that there is bit of... impropriety in the proposal. Scheme, if you will."

Sheldon looked up, finally meeting her eyes. "Is it any more improprious than having one of the great theoretical physicists of our day excluded from what would likely be one of his career-defining projects?"

"I should think not," she replied.

"Then let's hear it. I'm all ears. What solution is there to the unjustified hindrance of advancement by a nation so blinded by mindless protocol that it would hold against me the noble dreams I entertained as a boy of supplying my town with renewable energy, while all but ending my adult efforts to further advance the technological progression of this idiot race?"

"Just listen" she pleaded. "It's just..." She paused. "Well, Sheldon..." She stopped again.

"Either present your proposal or be on your way," he said.

"Well, Sheldon, am I correct in my understanding that you are... unmarried?"

He slowly sat up in his chair, and his former look of derision transformed into one of pure bewilderment. "I am baffled as to how that detail would have any relevance to our current predicament."

She advanced forward, taking a seat right in front of his desk. Her voice lowered to something just above a whisper. "I am a native daughter of Switzerland. In that fact, there is an advantage in that, if you, Sheldon, are unwed, then..." She stopped, goading him towards the conclusion.

"I'm afraid that I am at a complete loss as to what you may be suggesting," he said. Lise-Marie gave up.

"Sheldon, you and I could get married. That would provide you with a perfectly legal visa to enter my country, and quickly. Since you face no opposition from the actual LHC, such a visa would
enable you to legally enter the country and fulfill your duties without waiting on the visa for scientific study.'

Sheldon sat aghast at this notion; he didn't say anything.

"Before you answer," she said, "I know that you have a daughter and I would never want to do anything to threaten her well-being. We could execute the marriage secretly," she explained. "We could choose the day and hour and proceed in a clandestine manner, even conducting the ceremony in another county or state. Las Vegas, perhaps. That is, if you aren't opposed?"

His breath quickened, and she could see his chest rising and falling with every breath. He turned away, looking down to his side. "You don't know me, Lise-Marie," he said, firmly.

"I would never claim to. But I do know that you are dedicated scientist who cannot be stifled by the absurdity of red tape and fine print."

He didn't hear her. He just shook his head. "No," he said.

"Hold on, Sheldon, hear me out. This is a perfectly legal mechanism. It is a loophole in the immigration law that would enable you to—"

"No," he said, turning back to her. "No."

She stared at him incensed. "So that is it, then. You are just going to give up?"

"I'm not giving up. I just don't see matrimony as a viable option."

"So what do you see as a viable option?"

He closed his eyes, pressed them shut, like if he opened them, emotion and anger might spill out. When he opened them, a look came over his face that rejected her proposal more firmly than any of the refusals that had come before it.

"Please take your leave," he said.

She rose, visibly agitated, and then walked to the door. "I ask that you not speak of this conversation with anyone else."

"I wouldn't think of it," he said.

With that, she left.

Howard got home from work and was surprised to see Bernadette's car in the driveway. The story time must have gone faster than he thought. He turned the key and walked through the door poised to yell, "BERNIE, I'M HOME!" but found his wife on the couch, sorting socks.

"You're home!" he declared, making his way over to her. They shared an easy kiss.

"Did you get to meet up with Dmitri?" she asked.

"Of course. The bonds between astronauts are not easily broken, Bernie. We kicked back, talked about old times..." He looked away, rather smugly. "I could tell the old bastard was glad to see me."

Bernadette shook her head, laughing a little. "I'm glad you had a good time."
"Thanks," he said, dropping his satchel to the floor. "How was story time?"

"Awww, Howie," she said, poking out her bottom lip. "We didn't go."

He looked down the hall towards the boy's bedroom and back at Bernadette. "Why not?"

She shook her head and turned her lips. "Joel's sick. Poor thing. He was complaining of a tummy ache."

"A tummy ache?" Howard asked. There was doubt in voice, but Bernadette didn't pick up on it.

"Yeah, a tummy ache. I put some ginger in his sippee cup, and I've been taking his temperature every hour in case he develops a fever."

Howard just looked at her with disbelief, chuckled a little and marched off. He opened the door to the boys' bedroom and saw Joel and Adam on the floor banging their toys with plastic bowling pins. They jumped up and hugged him when Howard opened the door then wandered off and resumed playing. Howard made his way back to the living room.

"Stomach ache, huh?"

Bernadette looked up, noting his tone for the first time. "Yeah. Why?"

"Joel looks like the picture of health to me," he said. "He's in there bowling 300."

"You think I made this up?"

"Maybe," Howard said with a shrug. "Sure would be a good way to get out of story time."

Bernadette's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me? You actually think I'm lying about this?"

"I think I know a sick kid when I see one."

"Well you may be an engineer, Howard, but I am a biologist, and I know enough about the effects of microbes in small children to know that kids may continue to play and appear energetic even after the onset of symptoms. It would have been irresponsible for me to expose other children to whatever he might have."

"Or maybe it just would have just been a bother to take them to hear about Thing One and Thing Two." He stormed off.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Dinner," he said. "Maybe I'll put a little ginger in the mac and cheese."

After Amy got the twins into bed, she crept to her bedroom (with a cup of oolong tea in hand), tucked herself under the covers and grabbed the remote control. Since Family Movie Night would be preempted that week for Sheldon's work engagement, they had agreed to have it on this particular night instead. However, it was almost eight-thirty, and Sheldon had called saying he'd be home as soon as he could.

In the end, she'd made the decision to watch *Fiddler on the Roof* alone. She scrolled through the Netflix menu, humming "yubby, dibby, dibby, dibby, dibby, dibby, dum," to herself. She soon found the movie and pushed play. The opening credits began, and she was taking a sip of her tea when her bedroom door opened.
"Sheldon!" she said, pleasantly surprised. "I didn't think I would be seeing you for some hours still."

He nodded wearily. "I wasn't sure myself," he said, taking off his reflective vest and helmet.

"Did you get to say goodnight to the children?" Amy asked.

"They were already asleep," he said, fatigue written all over his face.

"Too bad," she said, but still upbeat. "Otherwise, you're in luck. I'm just now getting started on the movie. If you want I can pop some popcorn, and we can make a night of it. What do you say?"

He said nothing and, after glancing at the screen, uncharacteristically tossed his messenger bag at the foot of the bed and then, even more shockingly, climbed onto the mattress, fully clothed. Amy searched her memory, but she was sure it was a first.

"Aren't you afraid that microbes you may have encountered on the street are going to infest the bed sheets?" she asked.

"I'll strip the bed in the morning," he said groggily and lied down on his back right beside her. She turned her head to him. He was breathing heavy as if he'd just run a marathon.

Or ridden Enrico home.

She wondered about the visa meeting. "How was your day?" she asked. He turned his face towards hers. They were so close, she could feel his breaths against her face.

"You first," he said.

She nodded. "Well, actually I have a bit of good news. After running some errands, I took the twins over to that library where Howard and Bernadette live for story time. Despite inviting us to go to the library with her, she never showed. Nonetheless, you'll be happy to know that Robert and Aditi, though silent, actually sat among the other children."

"Was the literature suitable?" he asked through closed eyes.

"Indeed," she confirmed. "They were having a Dr. Seuss marathon. Though the twins moved on from those books a couple years ago, it was pleasant to revisit old friends. They had a book sale afterwards, and Robert settled on a book on the noble gasses. Aditi chose some of Seuss’ books that have been translated into Italian. It appears that she might have an aptitude for the languages."

"Stands to reason," Sheldon said. "She learned to talk very early." He paused reflectively. "I would like to peruse Robert's book when it arrives. I hope it gives sufficient attention to the tricky nature of boron's valence electrons."

The swell of the opening music began, and their attention turned to the film; the conversation fell off a while. Amy was a little more engaged in the movie while Sheldon was silent in all the places he usually laughed or hummed along. He only spoke at one point to ask her to turn off the lamp. Sheldon finally decided to change into his pajamas when the intermission started, and by then it was close to ten. With an hour left of the movie, she wasn't sure if he was up to it.

"Do you want to soldier through," she asked, "or stop here?"

"Soldier through," he answered without deliberation, pulling on a pair of flannel pants, and then promptly left. Minutes later he returned with cut up apples. He climbed into bed with them on a
plate and wordlessly offered her some. She took the plate, then sat up a little, propping herself against a mound of pillows behind her back. To her surprise, he lay back down as before. She looked down at his face, which was upside down from her perspective and, biting an apple slice in half, she lowered the rest of it to his mouth. He turned his face up upwards, rolling his eyes back until they met hers, and then took the piece of fruit in his mouth, chewing it slowly. Sheldon didn't eat behind anyone else. No one. Not even his mother, not even the children, and especially not Aditi, who treated every meal like an opportunity to test the bounds of the human immune system. He only ate after Amy and only in private, in moments like this one. Over the course of their relationship, a shared cup had become a shared straw. A shared plate had become a shared fork. A shared slice of cake became a shared bowl of ice-cream. It was a bit of intimacy they shared that never, ever got old. She liked it more than she let on.

She brushed her fingers through the hair on the crown on his head, and he slowly leaned against her lap. After a few strokes, his eyes fell shut and she thought he might be falling asleep, until the character Perchik proposed to Hodel.

"Amy," he said, without moving a muscle.

"Yes," she said, still watching the movie, still stroking his hair.

And then nothing. Ever so subtly, she felt him tensing again. She didn't like it.

"If this has anything to do with the visa meeting," she began, "we can talk about it in the morning, right?"

He looked back towards her, then straight ahead at the movie.

"Do you feel the same way about marriage that you always have?" he asked.

Amy couldn't have been more surprised by the question. Even the proposal in the movie didn't account for it. They watched romantic scenes all the time, and she could testify that generally did little to alter Sheldon's 'mood.'

In fact, she wasn't even sure what "the same way you always have," meant. It had gotten murkier in recent years.

"I don't know, Sheldon," she said. She pulled her hand from his hair and ate another apple slice.

"Why?"

"I was curious," he answered simply.

They sat in silence for the rest of the movie.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

A little Lycra never hurt anyone.

Leonard was in his office going through his email when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called, and then hit send. He'd made a PowerPoint presentation of 48 digital sonograms of their yet-to-be-named daughter and he thought all his friends would really enjoy it. The pictures were just so cute.

"Hello," came a female voice, with an accent Leonard didn't recognize. He looked up.

"Dr. Zurbriggen," he said, standing up for reasons he didn't even understand. She had a phantom presence in the building, like a ghost or maybe vampire; reports of her sightings were frequent but hushed. Her appearances were never so open, and never by the light of day. "How may I help you?" he asked.

"Yes. I am assisting the secretary with a few matters."

"You?" Leonard said, surprised. "Aren't you, like, from the LHC? I'm sure you didn't come all this way to do busy work."

The irony was crushing.

"Well, it takes a team effort, does it not? You see, she is updating the records for the faculty and staff members' emergency files. If you would be so kind, may I have the name and phone number of the person she should call in the case that you have an emergency?"

"Sure, sure," Leonard said. "My wife's number is 555-951-7536, and her name is Penny Hofstadter. H-O-F-S-T-A-D as in dog, T as in Tom (that's the tricky part), E-R. Hofstadter."

She nodded, writing in a small notepad. "And 'Penny,' like the coin?"

"Yep," he said. "Or like the psycho nun number three in Summer of a Thousand Nights."

"Your wife is an actress, Dr. Hofstadter?"

"Yep," he said, nodding proudly.

"I'm afraid I do not watch soap operas."

He diverted his eyes.

"Well, thank you," she said turning to leave. Then paused. "If I may bother you for one more matter, Dr. Cooper was not in his office when I stopped by. I am under the impression that you are friends."

"We are."
"Do you happen to have his wife's number?" she said, leaning on the word "wife." If there was a woman in Sheldon's life, Lise-Marie needed to know.

Leonard looked at her suspiciously. "I thought you had their number. Didn't you call while I was over there one night?" It was a lie, but she didn't know that, and was clearly startled by the statement. It easily could have been true.

She cleared her throat. "I suppose I did. However, I failed to save it in my mobile phone. Silly me."

"Silly you," Leonard said.

She caught his drift. "Thank you, Dr. Hofstadter," she said. He nodded. With that she left and marched back to her clandestine office, slamming the door behind her.

Penny sat on the edge of the bed, her patience waning and her heart despairing. She felt like she was caught in an episode of What Not to Wear: Live from Polyesterville.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh," Amy said, pulling from her closet yet another skirt made of synthetic material. "I could wear this," she said, then grabbed a multi-colored top with ruffled sleeves, "with this. Sheldon thinks I look sexy when I wear this. He likes all the colors."

Penny thought the combination looked like a cry for help. "He used the word 'sexy'?

"Well, not exactly, but it was evident from his dilated pupils and increased perspiration that his heightened regard for my appearance stemmed from sexual attraction. If I'd still had access to my magnetoencephalography equipment, I could have easily confirmed my observations with quantifiable data."

Penny pointed to a solid red dress in the closet. "What about that one? I seem to remember you looking smoking hot in that dress." Or at least not hideous, but why split hairs?

Amy rolled her eyes. "That dress is from the pre-twins era. I couldn't get in that thing now with a tub of Vaseline and an industrial-grade vacuum pump."

"This is going to be a lot harder than I thought," Penny muttered.

"Come now, Bestie. There must be something in here we can put together for a work dinner."

Penny sighed. "Let me ask you a question: when is the last time you actually bought a brand new, sexy, grown-ass woman dress?"

Amy bit her bottom lip and stared at the ceiling. "Well, I remember Smallville was on in the dressing room, so it must have been—"

Penny had heard enough. "Sweetie, we have got to go shopping."

Amy drooped. "Penny, we simply don't have the disposable income for such gratuitous purchases. Until our house clears escrow, we've put a moratorium on all non-essential spending."

"Hold on," Penny said. "So you mean to tell me that shopping for clothes is on your list of, like, non-necessities?"

"Of course," Amy said. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Penny held a hand to her head. She felt faint. "Well, thank God I live in a household that's a little
more fashion forward. Uncle Leonard just became your fairy godmother."

"I don't know," Amy protested, "I don't think Sheldon would ever be able to look Leonard in the face again if he knew he'd bought me a dress."

"Trust me; neither of them is ever going to know," she said, grabbing Amy's hand and marching her out the door. "Grab the car seats. We're going shopping."

Penny and Amy walked the aisles of Cohen's, Penny's favorite department store. Each woman was pushing one of those highest, posh shopping carts (the hipster big brothers of the ones found at Wal-Mart, or maybe Target) as they perused the store's party wear. Aditi was having a private dance party in the back of one cart, finding the store's selection of smooth classics to be suitable accompaniment for a brisk boogie. Robert was in the other cart,- playing a Batman game on Amy's cell. Apparently his phone privileges had been reinstated. Meanwhile, the adults in their party were suffering from… creative differences.

"Let me make this easier for you," Penny said, sounding suspiciously like Stacy London. "Polyester, rayon, and acrylic equal bad. Linen, cotton, and silk equal good. Let's stay away from the synthetics, okay? Except for Lycra. A little stretch never hurt anybody."

Amy stared at the dress she was holding in her hand then back at Penny. "So you're saying you don't like this dress?"

Penny shook her head. "Put it back," she whispered. Amy did as she was told. Then Penny realized she didn't have a firm grasp on what this soiree even was. "Where is this thing going to be again?"

"At one of his colleague's homes. She's having over quite a few members of the Physics Department."

"Funny, Leonard wasn't invited. What's her name?"

"Lise-Marie," Amy said. She saw a two-piece ensemble that she thought was pretty, but was almost afraid to make another suggestion. She checked the tag. It was 100 percent polyester. She kept looking.

"Her?" Penny said, a little suspiciously. "That bitch's name keeps coming up."

Her reaction surprised Amy… for more reasons than one. "Penny, language," she admonished her friend gently, and nodded towards the kids. Neither one had seemed to have heard.

Penny froze, and her jaw dropped. "I got to get a handle on the cursing," she reminded herself, no doubt thinking of her imminent motherhood.

"Besides," Amy continued, a bit confused, "what makes her a…" She mouthed the word "bitch."

"I dunno," Penny said, combing through a rack of boleros. "She just strikes me as a home wrecker. Always working late and needing 'one more hour.'" She leaned in close to Amy. "I have good bitchdar, Amy. It's like gaydar, just for bitches."

Amy shrugged. "Well, she and Sheldon have had their run-ins, but she seems largely harmless. I've never met her, but I think she's an older woman, matronly even. Sheldon says they only keep her on the project because they don't trust him to work alone and frequently refers to her as his 'babysitter.' I think he rather views her as an uninvited mother figure."
"Whatever," Penny said shrugging. She pulled a cocktail dress form the rack and held it up to Amy. "You'd know better than me. It's just that Leonard never talks about her. Has Sheldon been acting weird lately?"

Amy shrugged, unable to think of anything particularly alarming. "I mean, last night he got in the bed with his clothes on."

Penny rolled her eyes. "Oh wow, that's so radical."

Amy was not amused. "Sheldon struggles with sarcasm," she said. "I, however, do not."

She did, actually, but Penny was busted nonetheless.

"Okay, fine. Is that all?" she asked, more sincerity in her voice.

Something came back to Amy that had given her pause at the time. "Well actually… last night, he also asked me how I felt about marriage."

Penny's head snapped to Amy, her mouth agape. "That's not weird, Amy; that's awesome! Maybe he's thinking about popping the question." She nudged her friend's arm.

"I'm not sure," Amy said, shaking her head. "Something was… off."

"Well, have you guys ever talked about marriage before?" Penny asked. She spotted a polka-dotted blouse that was perfect for late summer. She threw it in the cart. After a moment of silence, with no word from Amy, she looked up.

Amy was standing there frozen, her face inscrutable. Penny didn't know if she had hit a nerve or sent her friend into a trance.

"Amy?" she called.

Amy's head snapped up.

"Are you okay?" Penny asked.

"Yes," Amy said, suddenly springing into a harried and frantic search… in a rack of bathing suits.

"I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn," Penny said. "If it's none of my business I compl—"

"We did talk about marriage, once," Amy said, pausing her search and looking pensive. "But his mother got sick and life got complicated. We haven't spoken of it since."

Penny could see the regret or sadness or disappointment in Amy's eyes, and drew closer, placing a hand swollen with water retention on her friend's arm. "Well, maybe it's time."

Amy didn't say anything.

"Excuse me, ma'am," came a voice from behind. Penny and Amy turned around. It was a sales associate. "If you'd like, I can direct you to our maternity department. Oh Penny!" the woman said beaming. "Look at you!" she squealed.

"I know, I know," Penny said. "This baby is about ready to drop."

"You are positively glowing." She drew closer to Penny. "Is that from the pregnancy or, ahem, has Leonard been taking care of Mommy, if you know what I mean."
Penny swatted at her arm. "Martha!" she squealed. "But, um, all of the above."

Both women collapsed into naughty giggles, leaning into each other. "The poor guy doesn't know it's too late for twins?" Martha quipped.

"Yeah, but it doesn't stop him from trying," Penny said. Tears were literally coming from their eyes.

Amy was clearly uncomfortable with the topic of discussion, and pulled out her iPod. "Sit down Aditi and put these on," she said, scrolling to her kid-friendly playlist.

"But I was dancing," Aditi whined.

"Please, listen to Mommy," she said. And not these women. Aditi took the iPod and ear buds and sat down in the cart.

Penny didn't miss the purpose of the exchange. "Anyway," she said, trying to change the subject. "Martha, this is my friend Amy. Amy, this is Martha—my clothier extraordinaire. Seriously, she has a real eye for putting outfits together."

"You're the supreme model to work with, Penny," Martha said blushing. "What we got going on today? An audition? A bare-belly photo session? Don't tell me… Neonatal Ward chic?"

"Trust me; I will be back for that. But today we're here shopping for Amy," she said, pointing to said friend. "She has a dinner party—"

"And a job interview," Amy interjected. "On Sunday."

"You have a job interview on a Sunday?" Penny asked, shocked.

"I hate always imposing on your time, especially so late into your pregnancy, to ask you to babysit. The chairman of the Physics Department said a Sunday interview was fine; there would be less interruptions and he gets more done on the weekends."

Penny turned back to Martha. "Okay then, she has a dinner party on Friday and a job interview on Saturday. We couldn't find anything in her closet to wear."

The woman gave Amy a full-body once-over, not missing her mismatched prints, ill-fitting top, and unflattering shoes. "I can imagine," she said with clasped hands.

"Please tell me you have something that is going to make her the belle of the ball… and get the job."

The woman lowered her eyelids and stroked her chin, leveling a cool stare at Amy. Amy wasn't sure if the "clothier extraordinaire" was going to dress her or eat her.

"Follow me," she said at long last and marched off. Penny took off hurriedly behind her. Her voice dropped to a low whisper.

"So, Martha. When we're done here, do you think she can get one of those 16-8 discounts?" She gave the woman an exaggerated wink.

"Check out in my line," Martha said with a demure smile.

"What's a 16-8 discount? Amy whispered to Penny."
"The PH discount. For Penny Hofstadter. It's good for 33 percent off with Martha. That chick in the red shirt only gives me 15 percent—the little wench."

Amy made a mental note to go shopping with Penny more often.

Howard was soldering together two pieces of wire to finalize his latest project: a device that doubled as a sterilizer and a popcorn popper. He really could use both.

Just then, he cell rang. He looked at the number. "Yello," he answered.

"Hello. Is Howard Wolowitz available?" the woman on the other end asked.

"Speaking," he answered a twinge of nervousness in his voice.

"This is the Jewish Community Center Daycare. We're calling in regards to Joel Wolowitz."

Howard swallowed hard.

Bernadette was trying to explain to her grad student why a "hangover" would not be an acceptable excuse for mislabeling deadly microbes in a commercial pathology lab when her cell phone rang.

"Excuse me," she said pulling off her gloves. "And don't touch anything." She saw it was Howard. "Hi," she said, deliberately cheery. They had left the house on a wonky note earlier that morning, which she didn't like.

"You were right," he said.

"So you do use vinegar in the water when you poach an egg?"

"Um," Howard said. "Turns out you're right about that, too, but I was talking about Joel."

"Why? What happened?"

"The JCC just called. It turns out he has a fever and they had me come and pick both boys up."

"Oh my God," Bernadette gasped. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's alright. It's a low-grade fever… 100.2. Apparently there's a 48-hour bug going around his class and he managed to catch it. I gave him a Popsicle and told him to lie down. If it gets worse I'll let you know, but at the moment it doesn't look to serious."

"Well, I'm glad," she said.

"Glad that it isn't serious or glad that you're right?"

"Glad that he's okay," Bernadette said, a little too enthusiastically.

Howard paused a moment. "Go ahead and say it," he said.

"Say what?" she said, feigning ignorance.

"Look, this is a limited time offer. Take advantage of it."

"Fine," Bernadette said. "I told you so!"

Howard rolled his eyes. "Bye, Bernie," he said.
"Bye, Howie," she replied. Then they hung up.

She turned to her student and groaned. It would take the rest of the afternoon to separate the yeast from the small pox.

Amy awoke to the feeling of the mattress shaking beneath her. Considering the fact that Sheldon typically slept like a Disney princess, her sleep-addled mind fought to come up with a theory. She could only come up with one: Aditi.

"Aditi," she moaned into the darkness. "You need to go back to your bed."

"It's not Aditi," Sheldon said. His voice was clear and strong, like he had been awake for hours. It was startling. She turned over and saw him bent over on the edge of the bed, likely putting on slippers.

"What's going on?" she asked, or croaked actually.

"I've done it," he said with muted enthusiasm. Then he rose, walking towards the door.

"Done what?" she asked, following his shadow in the dark.

"Shhh," he said softly, pausing briefly at the door. "Get your rest." He left, closing the door behind him.

She wanted to take his advice, she really did, but she was suffering from the double whammy of being shaken awake and having her interest peaked. She was up.

Pulling her robe around her, she padded her way to the living room, where Sheldon was literally working by candlelight.

"Why not turn on the overhead lamp?" she asked.

"All the greats worked by candlelight, Amy," he said. "No need to tamper with success."

She sat next to him on the couch. He was scribbling frantically in a gridded lab book with a speed he rarely did, writing down his thoughts in numbers, letters and Greek characters with the same fluidity someone may write out well-wishes in a birthday card. Amy's post-graduate work and relationship with Sheldon meant she had more knowledge of Physics than the Average Joe (or Jane, as the case may be), but when Sheldon pushed the limits of his own knowledge, there were few people in the world that could keep up with him.

"What are you writing?" she asked.

But he didn't hear her. He probably didn't even know she was there. She had seen him like this before—on the brink of figuring out something exciting—completely engaged, locked in to what he was doing. When he was pouring himself out onto the page, virtually nothing got in.

She felt a swell of pride watching his pencil dance across the page. She kissed him on the crown of his head, and then walked back to the bedroom. She wouldn't see him again until morning.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Howard's Must See TV? America's Next Top Magician!

Chapter Notes

Consider this Part1 to a two-part chapter. There was more story here than I realized.

Seibert was in his office having just ended a phone call from the Alumni Association when he heard a traveling commotion outside of his door that was getting closer by the second.

"Dr. Cooper, Dr. Cooper, DR. COOPER!" came a shrill voice on the other side of the door, which sounded a lot like his secretary, Mrs. Johnson. A second later, Sheldon burst through his door with Mrs. Johnson behind him.

"He does not have an appointment, and I notified him of such," she said.

"I'm sure you did, Mrs. Johnson," Seibert said, rising. "He has a problem with following directions."

"I have excellent news," Sheldon announced cheerfully, "that I believe will have a profound impact on recent events."

Dr. Seibert nodded to Mrs. Johnson. "Thank you. You can go."

She shot Sheldon one final glare then left, shutting the door behind her.

"Your news arrives at a good time," Seibert said. "I have a bit of good news relevant to you as well."

"Is that so?" Sheldon asked. "Does your news concern the future of mankind's fundamental understanding of quantum chaos?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't," Seibert said. "Go ahead—dazzle me."

"Great," Sheldon said, clasping his hands together. "Goopity goppity, flooey, flammy, tabarken, cooboo, tabee, lamee, sapu, rumpelly dumpelly, carden."

That wasn't exactly what Sheldon said, but that's more or less what Seibert heard.

"Is... that your good news?" Seibert asked, just for the sake of clarification.

Sheldon was appalled. "Is that my g—, of course it's my good news! Were you listening to a single word I said?"
At that moment his phone rang. Dr. Seibert pushed a button on his table phone. "Yes, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Your 9:30 appointment is here," she said.

Dr. Seibert nodded. "Send her in." He turned to Sheldon. "That should be Dr. Zurbriggen."

Sheldon was surprised. "What could she want?"

"She is returning a rare, discontinued book she borrowed from my personal library."

A moment later she walked in. She nodded at the President. "Dr. Seibert," she said, and then she spotted Sheldon. "Dr. Cooper?"

"He was sharing some exciting news," Dr. Seibert said. "Would you like to share with Dr. Zurbriggen what you just shared with me?"

Sheldon perked up. "Well, she's going to find out in short order anyway, but... I would be delighted." He cleared his throat. "Goopity goppity, flooey, flammy, parameter dependence, tabarken, cooboo, tabee, lamee, adiabatic assumption, sapu, rumpeley dumpelly, energy-level degeneracy, carden."

She caught scarcely more that Dr. Seibert had. She cleared her throat and snuck a glance at the President. He subtly shrugged his shoulder and gave her the look of a deer in headlights.

"That is rather fascinating," she said. "Well be sure to include it in the next report."

"Next report?" Sheldon said. "Do you realize the impact that this finding will have on the Physics community at large? If the ideas I synthesized are correct and substantiated by our group's experimentation at the LHC, I am on the verge of solving one of the great quandaries of modern physics."

"Excellent," Dr. Seibert said. "This brings us to my news. The LHC is trying to keep you aboard and said that they would be willing to work with you as an adjunct or maybe even a consultant to the team, preserving your affiliation with the project."

The news almost sounded promising. Except for one thing. "Would I be able to preserve my position as lead theorist?"

"Um," Dr. Seibert said hesitantly, chewing on the words he had yet to say. "They would need somebody in a more stable situation within the organization to actually spearhead the project, who can travel with ease and is a user of the LHC."

Sheldon shook his head. "Then that proposal is unacceptable."

Seibert raised an eyebrow. "Unacceptable to whom?"

"To me," Sheldon said. He was thinking about the house. The truth was he needed the money. "There are personal considerations for me as well."

"Other than your ego?" Seibert said.

"You must speak with again, persuade them to reconsider."

Seibert was confused. "I thought you were all about the science. I thought you hated the titles and administrative duties."
"They have their place, Dr. Seibert. And we all know titles equal access. Access I will be denied if I am transferred to a position only tangentially related to the project."

Seibert shook his head. "That's a very generous offer," he said. "You really should consider it. Or you may just be cut altogether."

"You can't cut me!" Sheldon yelled.

"From where do you get this sense of entitlement, Dr. Cooper? Nobody is indispensable. Physics didn't stop when Einstein died."

"But it was a major loss," Lise-Marie said in a fiery outburst. Both men turned to her, Seibert with confusion, Sheldon with pleasant surprise. "Some men do great things, sure, but some men change the world. at times I do not think you recognize what you have here, sir. It really frustrates me, in fact, and I can't just sit back and watch while you squander this opportunity. You should absolutely be doing more to preserve his standing."

Seibert didn't respond immediately, and after a moment, he turned to Sheldon. "Can you leave us to talk, Dr. Cooper?" he said.

Sheldon happily complied. "I have a mountain of work to get back to. Good day," he said, and left.

When he was gone, Seibert looked back at Lise-Marie, and he was not pleased. "What the hell was that?" he asked.

"I am so sorry, Dr. Seibert," she said, suddenly chastened. "But Dr. Cooper and his ego must be handled a certain way to get the best results. That is why I am here, is it not?"

"You are not here to disrespect me or my position or to question my decisions. You pull another stunt like that and you'll be back at the LHC before you can say au revoir."

She nodded sheepishly. "I completely understand. Forgive me," she said.

He nodded.

"You should know that they've all but decided to call you back next week."

"Next week?" she said breathless. "Can you not stall them? Like before?"

He shook his head. "The decision really isn't mine to make."

She turned away, shaken.

"This is a trying time for everyone," he added.

"So it is," she said as she left.

Lise-Marie stood outside of Sheldon's door. This was her absolute last chance. Even standing there, she didn't even know what she would say, but she had to get him to that party tonight. She had to.

She turned the handle to his door; it wasn't locked. She just went in. He looked up at her.

"Lise-Marie, there is a protocol for entering the private work areas of others that typically includes, at a minimum, several knocks. Repeating the person's name isn't even out of the question."
"I am aware of that, Sheldon," she said. "But I am just so irate over the treatment you received back there," she said. "I just couldn't sit back and watch as he minimized your value."

At the memory of it, Sheldon nodded. "Honestly, I was surprised at your response. I thought you might prefer it if I left."

"Far from it," she said. "I realize that our last conversation was… a bit rocky. I apologize if I overstepped my bounds. I had no idea you were in a relationship."

Sheldon's head snapped up. He looked back at his papers. "It's not a secret," he said.

"I know, I know," she said, advancing closer. "It's just, well, you don't have any pictures around the office… of her… or anyone else."

Sheldon felt a bit defensive. "My office is not the place to broadcast my personal affairs," he said. "Such sentimentality is best left in the privacy of one's home."

"I agree," Lise-Marie said, nodding with a serious countenance. "I only wish more people felt as you did." There was a long pause and she drew even closer, until she was right up on him, one hand delicately landing on the side of his desk. "Still, I can't help but wonder if… you carry around guilt towards them."

Sheldon looked up at her before responding, confusion on his face. "Guilt?" he repeated. And then, more bafflingly, "Them?"

"Yes, them. Your lover. The twins. Your family."

The intimacy of the statement made Sheldon severely uncomfortable. "My 'lover's' name is Amy."

"Ah yes, Amy, that is what he said," she said off-handedly.

Sheldon didn't know to whom she was referring. "Who said?"

"Dr. Hofstadter. He mentioned you were living with a woman named Amy."

"He did?" Sheldon asked, surprised. He turned away pensively. "Did he also tell you I have twins?"

Actually, she had learned that nugget of information from Sheldon's outburst in the visa meeting. "Yes, he did," she lied. "He is a friend of yours, is he not?"

Sheldon nodded. "He is."

She perched herself on the tip of his desk. "He also told me that you were a wonderful family man. Attentive, loving, a good provider." She looked out of the window, seemingly lost in thought, and shook her head. "Maybe that is why I am baffled as to why you feel like you are letting them down."

"I don't feel like I'm…" he could barely say the words, "letting them down."

"No?" she said. He didn't answer. "I see it when you are agitated when you have to work late. The hushed telephone conversations back home. The harried way you work. You want to be there for them. You do not want to fail them."

The words sat on Sheldon, resonating down to his core. He didn't want to fail his family. He didn't want to let them down.
He didn't even realize his eyes were closed.

"But there is something else I know," she added. She leaned forward, practically whispering. "I know you want the Nobel Prize." He opened his eyes and she was right there. They were staring at each other, face to face.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

The truth was, it was common knowledge, and back in Switzerland she had heard tales of his fiasco at the North Pole. Such a story, however, would never do. She had a better answer.

"I can see it in your eyes," she began. "In the way you work. In the way you type. Even in the way you gaze. You do not just have dedication; you have passion. While others speak, you preach. They are content with another published paper, another raise and more letters behind their names. But you," she paused, shaking her head. "You want more. At the LHC, I work with the greats every day, Nobel laureates and great men of change who have fire in their bellies and grit in their eyes. These men aspire for more. I know such men when I see them, Sheldon. I see such a man in you. You won't be content until that prize is sitting on your mantle, and more… you know better than anyone else how close you are to getting it."

He suddenly stood, pacing over to another table a few feet away. "I do want it," he whispered.

"And some day," she said, rising as well, "you will have it."

He turned to her.

"I look forward to seeing you tonight? With Amy?" she said.

_The party_. He nodded. "Of course."

"Then, I'll see you then," she said, and left.

Bernadette and Howard were curled up on the bed watching the latest episode of "America's Next Top Magician." In this program, illusionists from around the nation competed for a chance to win a half million dollars and to get an act in Vegas. This was only the second episode and they were still in the audition round. Howard was unimpressed.

"He calls that magic?" he said, scoffing at the screen. "I've seen better sleight-of-hand tricks out of the sandwich makers at Subway."

"His assistant is cute," Bernadette said.

"Not as cute as mine," he said. They shared a kiss.

Just then there was a commercial break. Bernadette thought it was a good time to bring something up.

"I'm not mad now," she began. That introduction made Howard nervous. "But why didn't you believe me when I said Joel was sick?"

"I don't know, Bernie," he said. "I let my imagination get the better of me. I thought maybe you were getting tired of the whole mother thing and was looking for a way out."

"But I'm really trying," she said. "I want to help you Howard. I want the boys to have a happy childhood."
Howard nodded, but kind of distantly, like there was something he wasn't saying.

"You don't think I'm doing better?" Bernadette asked.

"Absolutely, sweetie, and you're doing a great job," Howard said. He took her hands in his. "But... I want the day to come when you are doing this for you, because you want to. Not because you want to help me and not just because you want the boys to be happy. I want you to be happy, too."

"I am happy," Bernadette said. "I just... I was so convinced that motherhood would ruin my body, my career and my marriage, it's taking me a while to let those ideas go. And then when you don't trust me—"

"I trust you," Howard said.

"That's not how I felt the other day."

And he realized that was true. "I'm sorry," he said. "I had no idea. I mean... it never dawned on me —"

She put a finger over his mouth. "We're figuring this out together, Howie," she said. "We just can't forget that we're on the same team. You, me and the boys."

He nodded. "You're right. It's just us now, and we can't let anything come in between that."

"HO-WARD!" came a scream through the wall. Howard fell back against the bed, exasperated.

"WHAT MA?" he yelled back.

"DID YOU STILL WANT ME TO BRING CUPCAKES TO SCHOOL TOMORROW?"

"MA!" Howard yelled back, "I'M NOT IN SCHOOL; I'M A GROWN MAN."

"I'M TALKING ABOUT FOR THE BOYS, SMART ALECK. THE WORLD DOESN'T REVOLVE AROUND YOU, YOU KNOW."

"But it can revolve around you," he muttered under his breath. "SURE, BRING THE CUPCAKES!"

"AND YOU WANT ME TO DECORATE ONE FOR YOU WITH YOUR NAME ON IT AND A LITTLE SMILEY FACE IN SPRINKLES?"

"YES, PLEASE," he yelled back.

"AWWW," she cooed adoringly through the wall. "THAT'S MY BABYCAKES."

Howard, smiling, snuggled in closer to Bernadette. Just then the program started back up. Howard shook his head.

"Capes are so played out," he said.

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Lisa-Marie sat in front of her vanity, putting the finishing touches on her hair, makeup and outfit as the caterers mingled about downstairs. She settled on pinning up her hair in a style that was elegant and demure and, as she would be hosting the event alone among a gathering of couples, she thought it wise to wear a simple black dress and conservative accessories: her mother's broach with a string of pearls and matching earrings. She dabbed a little concealer under one eye and put
another bobby pin in her hair.

"Dr. Zurbriggen," came a voice from downstairs. It was Hannah, the woman who was overseeing the food preparation.

"One moment, Hannah," she called. "I am on my way down." She gave herself another once over in a full-length mirror, before nodding to herself in approval. She was ready to go downstairs. Then something crossed her mind. She walked back to her desk and opened her laptop. Going to Google, she typed in "Sheldon Cooper Amy." The query brought up a disparate list of restaurants, blogs, movie times and message boards. She tried again: "Dr. Sheldon Lee Cooper Amy." That query at least brought up something relevant to Sheldon, like his profile page at Caltech, several of his published articles and—the mother lode—his Facebook page. She clicked on it, only to see that it was completed locked. Cursing in French under her breath, she returned to the results page.

"Dr. Zurbriggen," Hannah called again.

Lise-Marie looked at the open door. "One more moment, Hannah!" she cried. She sighed, frustrated; there was so much she didn't know—not even a last name or profession. She tapped her manicure nails against the table and then tried one more time: "Sheldon Cooper Amy Pasadena twins," she typed, then she pressed enter.

Among the results was a page for a Lamaze class graduation from five years ago. Taking a chance, Lise-Marie clicked on the link. Underneath a tiny blurb on the class, she saw scribbled on the photo in amateurish captioning: Sheldon and… Amy. Clicking on it to make it bigger, she was just able to make out the face of the woman: be-speckled eyes, a toothy grin, no makeup to be seen anywhere, and hair without any definition whatsoever, save for a lone hairpin to the side. Even though Lise-Marie realized this woman was pregnant with twins, her size would have one believe she was carrying quintuplets. Lise-Marie nodded to herself and closed the window.

Curiosity satisfied, she closed her computer and went downstairs.

Sheldon sat on the couch, frequently glaring at his watch.

"AMY! Its 5:25. We're going to be late."

"Sheldon," she called back. "It doesn't start until six and she lives ten minutes from here. For once, I would like to be one of the couples that show up fashionably late and not one of the couples that get to finish sweeping up in the kitchen."

"How else can one ensure that the food has been prepared in a sanitary environment?"

"I thought you said it was catered."

Sheldon turned his mouth to the side. He had no response to that.

Meanwhile, Amy had been holed up in the bathroom for the last hour. Penny had come over earlier to apply her makeup, a combination she called "grown ass and kiss ass," and had even convinced Amy to give false lashes a whirl for the first time in her life. After painting her fingers and toes a fiery red, she trimmed Amy's sorely-neglected ends and put her hair up in hot rollers, leaving behind a dainty elastic that matched Amy's dress and clear instructions to "leave that hair clip at home." Against her better judgment, Amy had been persuaded to shave her legs and pits, and even don a pair of strappy heels. She strutted around the bathroom, taking the gold-colored footwear Martha had picked out for a test drive. When all the elements were together, she took a deep breath and winked at herself in the mirror.
After yet another five minutes had gone by without the appearance his date, Sheldon called after her, unaware she was already on her way out. A second later, Amy emerged. Her hair, replete with a faux bang, was voluminous and shiny. It was swept into a side ponytail that cascaded gentle waves over her left shoulder and was held in place with an elastic shaped like a tiny bow. Her lips were red and well-defined, her cheeks rosy, and her skin luminous, without a flaw in sight. Her eyelids were dusted a smoky grey, which made her already almond-shaped eyes look fetching and coy. Finally, there was the dress: a red, sleeveless, cocktail-length stunner, it boasted a heart-shaped bodice that accentuated Amy's neck and collarbones and tucked-fabric detailing that met over her hip and hugged all the right curves while hiding all the wrong ones. It ended in a pencil skirt that made her legs look like they went on for miles. The dress's sequin-embellished straps sat ceremoniously on her shoulders, and with one manicured hand on her hip and the other dangling a sexy clutch to her side, she looked in a word:

Stunning.

Sheldon stared at her, silent and blinking. As he looked on stupefied, Amy mentally rehearsed the story that Penny had taught her earlier that day: if Sheldon asked where the dress had come from, she was supposed to ask him, "Don't you remember the episode when Penny went to a wedding?" Sheldon, wholly uninterested in any of Penny's acting roles, would insist that he'd never seen the episode to begin with, and from there, could draw his own conclusions. It wasn't exactly a lie—just a well-placed question.

"How do I look?" Amy said, twirling around with a gold-colored clutch in her hand.

Sheldon stood up slowly, his eyes never wavering. "You look," he began, clearing his throat and pulling on his tie. "You look very nice."

Amy estimated that his pupils had dilated by about 45 percent: bull's eye.

"Don't you want to ask me something?" she asked.

"Um, yes," he said, drawing closer. His face was very solemn and held out his hand. "Would you like to go to the dinner party with me?" he asked.

Amy smiled to herself, laughing on the inside. It turns out her misleading question would be unnecessary after all. "Absolutely," she answered and took his outstretched hand. Then she shouted at the top of her lungs, "ROBERT! ADITI!"

Aditi came out running first, crying uncontrollably and practically trembling with anger. "Robert solo booboo baba beebee," she screeched in a high-pitched wail.

Sheldon squinted at the gibberish. "I'm sorry, but you will have to be clearer."

Aditi came out running first, crying uncontrollably and practically trembling with anger. "Robert solo booboo baba beebee," she screeched in a high-pitched wail.

Sheldon squinted at the gibberish. "I'm sorry, but you will have to be clearer."

Aditi fought to catch her breath, and was only partly successful in doing so. "Robert stole my Mrs. Bobbie Baby Bottle and won't give it back." She was flapping her arms in utter frustration and looked like she was on the verge of an all out tantrum.

A second later, Robert came running out. He had a screwdriver in one hand and the bottom of a bottle in the other. The hard plastic nipple (that otherwise had been secured to the base of the toy) was missing.

Amy was confused. "What is the devil would you want with your sister's Mrs. Bobbie Baby Bottle?"

"Amy, language," Sheldon scolded. She rolled her eyes.
"I was fixing it," he whined in his defense, starting to grow upset as well.

"HE BROKE IT!" she screamed. Then, letting out a final battle grunt, she ran over and tried to snatch it from him, but he yanked it back before she could grab it. She lunged again, but he dodged her and ran near Amy.

"Stop it, both of you," Amy insisted, but they paid her no heed. Aditi chased him, finally grabbing it, but was still unable to wrest it from his hands. They engaged in a seconds-long tug of war when the already-compromised toy exploded and shot a mix of powdery milky mixture all over the front of Amy's dress.

Amy gasped. All else went silent.

Both children fled, Robert under the coffee table and Aditi behind the crevice between the bookshelf and the wall where only she could fit. Sheldon looked even more shell-shocked than Amy.

"Amy," he said, the only word he could get out.

Regaining her wits, Amy just shook her head. "I'll have to dab out as much as I can. At any rate, I have a shawl I can throw over it." She went to the kitchen to procure a rag with soapy water, and then headed to the back to find a large scarf that someone had brought her back from a trip to Atlantic City. As she wondered how long it would take to dry the wet spots with her hair dryer, she hoped that Sheldon (who was likely the worse disciplinarian the world had ever seen) actually had a plan for dealing with the children.

Leonard was chopping up the fixings for a salad while Penny had her feet propped up, watching a judge show.

Just then there was a knock on the door. A moment later, there was a little knock that sounded like it was coming from closer to the floor.

"It's them," she said, then—after slowly easing her feet to the floor—she stood up and waddled to the door. When she opened it, she beheld the motliest crew of Fowler-Coopers she'd ever seen. One in particular arrested her attention.

"Amy," she groaned, barely hiding her disappointment at the quilted monstrosity hanging from her friend's shoulders. "We didn't talk about a shawl."

"I know," she said, then glared at her offspring, whom she had gripped in either hand. "They have been very naughty and came just close to destroying my outfit. Thank goodness I was able to salvage it."

Penny sighed, for more reasons than one. She looked down at Amy's children, who at the moment looked more like captives. "So, I guess I'm more warden tonight than playmate."

"You bet your sweet bippy," Amy replied. "No sweets, no television, no movies, no games, no coloring, no computer, and no bubble bath—they can take showers. Did I forget anything?"

"No air?" Leonard muttered from the kitchen.

Sheldon stepped forward. "And I'm to say that I agree with everything she said," he said plainly.

"Gee, Sheldon," Amy said, tartly. "Real supportive."
"Amy, we're late," he shot back. "At this point, all my thespian energies are going towards concocting a believable story that doesn't make us look like flagrant ingrates and hippy drifters." His single-mindedness was annoying Amy even more.

"Can I at least read them a story?" Penny asked.

Amy relented. "Yes. As long as it's educational." She pulled out a large tote bag. "There are a few things I need to go over with you, however, before we leave."

"Sure," Penny said. "What is it?"

Amy turned the twins loose, and they downheartedly wandered into the living room. She followed them inside and opened a small notebook. "At seven o'clock..." she began, as Penny looked on.

Meanwhile, Leonard slipped out of the kitchen and out into the hallway to talk to Sheldon.

"Hey," he said.

Sheldon nodded, rather stiffly. Leonard didn't know what to make of it.

"Is this the party that the Swiss girl is having?"

"The very one," Sheldon said, still a bit coolly.

"Well, keep an eye out for that one. She came sniffing around my office yesterday for information about you. I didn't give anything up, but I have a bad feeling about her."

"Oh, you gave up plenty," Sheldon said.

"Excuse me?" Leonard replied. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, spare me the theatrics, Leonard. Reserve your acting abilities for the con you're pulling on our department in regards to your research."

"What the hell is your problem?" Leonard asked.

Sheldon didn't say anything.

"Fine," Leonard said, shrugging his shoulders. "Believe whatever you want to believe, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Amy re-emerged from the apartment wearing a large floral broach that covered the lingering powder stain high on her dress. Miraculously, Sheldon noticed, giving Amy a slight nod of approval. She smiled and took his arm. "We should be back no later than midnight," she said. Then she leaned closer. "Sooner if this thing turns out to be a snoozer."

Penny laughed. "Have a good time guys. Don't worry if you need to come and get them in the morning… ahem, ahem," she said suggestively.

Amy winked at her, and they left.

As soon as the door shut, Penny turned to the children. They were both sitting on the middle cushion of the couch looking sad and forlorn. It was the first time in months Penny had seen Robert without his Batman toy, and Aditi's eyes were still damp; she was sniffling a little. Penny reached over to the box of Kleenex and handed the young girl a tissue. She dutifully wiped her eyes with it.
"Awww," Penny said. She turned to Leonard. "They look so sad."

"Well, you would look sad too if you had just been sentenced to twenty to life without parole," he quipped.

Penny sat down next to Robert.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asked. Neither child responded.

"Of course they don't want to talk about it," Leonard said. "They're four years old and one of them is a boy."

"Well, what I'm I supposed to do? I've been stripped of all my usual cheer-up techniques." She thought a moment. "Do you think fruit snacks count as candy?"

"Yes," Leonard said. "Here," he wiped his hands on a towel then walked over to the where the kids were and stooped down in front of the couch.

"We're going to play a game called 'Don't Laugh," he said. The plan sounded suspect to Penny.

"Um, I think we have a tie," she said.

"Give it a sec," Leonard said. He turned back to the twins, and then began sing. "I'm gonna tickle, tickle, tickle. I'm gonna tickle, tickle you. You're gonna giggle, giggle, giggle. You're gonna giggle when I tickle you." Then he proceeded to tickle them both with abandon, on their toes, behind ears and under their ribs. Much as the introductory song had promised, both children collapsed into giggles. "Hey!" Leonard said, pretending to be confused. "You laughed."

"Uncle Leonard, I'm not going to laugh next time," Robert said. "I'm going frown," he said, demonstrating the frown he planned to use.

"Well, let's see," Leonard said. He sang the song again and, once again, ended it with a hearty round of tickling. Both kids were helpless before him, laughing even more than before. The sound of their laughter made Penny smile.

"Where'd you learn that from?" she asked.

"My dad," Leonard said. "My mom said the humor in the game was a result of latent masculine aggression masquerading as physical titillation." He sighed. "It was the last game we ever played together." He started to sing the song again, and this time the children were practically shaking in anticipation of more tickling. Penny tapped Leonard on the head.

"I'll go and get the fruit snacks," she said, and walked off towards the kitchen.

Sheldon and Amy ascended the stairs to Lise-Marie's home, a house that was modest in size but undeniably stately with a manicured exterior and a high-columned porch. They could hear the sounds of merrymaking inside. Sheldon rang the doorbell. As they waited, Amy spotted something.

"Look," she said, nodding towards the lawn. Sheldon looked in the direction that she was indicating, but didn't see anything of interest. "It's a statue of Perchta," she explained. "The Nordic goddess known to cut open the stomachs of those who crossed her and fill them with hay and pebbles."

"Considering my current state of hunger, that almost sounds appealing," Sheldon said. He rang the
bell again, growing impatient.

Just then, the door opened.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Sheldon has a spill of his own.

Chapter Notes

Consider this Part 2 of a two-part chapter. Buckle up.

Twenty minutes after six o'clock had come and gone, Hannah began imploring Lise-Marie to end the cocktail portion of the evening and proceed directly to the dinner's first course: the raclette service. A Swiss tradition consisting of melted cheese that was presented with various other garnishes including a small potato and pickles, Hannah had gone to great lengths to prepare it according to her hostess's specifications. The delay was trying her patience.

"I believe we should begin with our first course," she suggested, as delicately as possible.

Lise-Marie, however, was not persuaded. "I am awaiting the arrival of a couple more guests," she said sternly, without making eye contact. "Just a few minutes more."

After Dr. Seibert had arrived late, apologetic and harried, with his girlfriend (a graphic artist that split her time between Pasadena and San Diego), Hannah had appeared to Lise-Marie once more with tension in her voice.

"When food is prepared in these quantities," Hannah explained, "it must be timed accordingly so that the quality is not compromised."

Lise-Marie sighed. "We'll announce dinner in five minutes," she conceded, "but not a moment sooner." She checked the wall clock; it was already after 6:30. Sheldon had never been late in her experience, and she couldn't imagine why he'd chosen tonight to start.

She was chatting with a researcher in the Particle Physics group when she heard the doorbell ring three times in quick succession. She gently pulled herself away from the conversation and made her way to the front door. Her journey, however, was frequently interrupted by guests who wanted to make a comment on the wine or inquire as to the origin of some figurine on the mantle. She was finally held hostage by Dr. Gonzalez's wife, who apparently had 'always been fascinated by the cultural and linguistic diversity of Switzerland and once wrote a dissertation on the cultural richness of the Romansch language.' As she droned on, Lise-Marie craned her neck and caught a glimpse of the newest arrival just beyond the door: Sheldon Cooper. He was talking to one of the attendants at the open door, and Lise-Marie—holding up one finger to Mrs. Gonzalez, accompanied by an effusive apology—started again towards the door. Sheldon turned his attention to, presumably, someone behind him and, a second later, in walked…

Amy.
But far from the homely train wreck Lise-Marie had seen in the Lamaze photo, this woman was a spectacular specimen, a model of beauty, elegance, poise and fashion. Her leg emerged from outside almost in slow motion, landing elegantly on her seductive heel, followed by the woman herself. Once inside, she paused for a moment—her clutch in hand and appearing striking and confident—and took a sweeping look around the home's interior. That single gesture did something to instantly collapse Lise-Maries plans of how to handle this woman, the final barrier between her and her objective. Just as Amy's gaze was due to pass by Lise-Marie, the latter woman ducked from view, slipping into a recess in the wall. She would have to change schemes and quickly, and she fought to focus her mind on the night ahead, except that her thoughts were preoccupied with one thought:

Just whom had Sheldon been hiding?

"This is a nice home," Amy said as she stepped ahead of Sheldon. He followed behind her anxiously, his hand hovering on her back. He looked around for the hostess, but found her nowhere. His efforts at locating her were cut short.

"Now that all of our guests have arrived," Lise-Marie announced from a significant distance, "we would like to direct everyone outside for the dinner service. Enjoy."

Sheldon and Amy were then swept into the current of couples moving towards the rear of the home. Upon exiting the back door, they were greeted to a long table on the veranda. It was elaborately set with fine china and cutlery, and decorated with appealing centerpieces and hanging lighting draped from decorative poles and the occasional obliging column. There were place cards on each plate, and as Sheldon and Amy circled the table, they quickly deduced the seating had been arranged in alphabetical order. When they got to where Cooper should be—between Bennegan and Gupta, he… wasn't there.

"You have been moved over there," Lise-Marie murmured, passing Sheldon quickly, without even meeting his eyes.

"Who is that?" Amy asked.

Sheldon looked over his shoulder at the woman taking her place at the head of the table. "That's Lise-Marie," he said.

Amy nodded, fleetingly finding it peculiar, but was soon distracted by the task of finding her seat. Placed on the other side near the foot of the table, Sheldon pulled out the seat in front of the place card for "Sheldon Cooper's guest" and Amy took her seat. He followed suit a moment later. A quick count showed there were 20 place settings—plus one.

Suitably warmed up by the alcohol they'd already consumed, the guests' conversation flowed freely and a lively din of voices—scattered by the outdoor acoustics—circled the table. The raclette only provided one more topic of conversation and Amy settled into a cordial, even lively, exchange with the woman to her right named Julie. The wife of Jane Logan from Particle Physics, she had recently given birth to a daughter, and she and Amy fell into conversation about the ups and downs of child rearing before somehow fading into a chat on the primate species of Tanzania and finally meandering into a rousing discussion on medieval fencing. Sheldon—less social and completely dry—was less inclined to hold court with his tablemates, and even less so as a combination of libations, multiple courses of food and the levity of a Friday night all combined to make the conversation drift to topics he found increasingly less appealing.

Derek Little in particular, a researcher with the Astrophysics group, started to get louder and louder
as the night wore on.

As Derek's conversation gradually began to engulf the table, Amy leaned in close to Sheldon. "Loony, eight o'clock," she whispered into his ear.

"He's in good company," Sheldon replied.

"Oh, come on, Quinn," Derek said, clutching his head as if he were conversing with the stupidest person he had ever encountered. His other arm was lazily draped around his girlfriend. "Your last talk was on a topic that was breaking news... in 2002."

"Right," Quinn replied. "That's why I was invited to give that very talk at the North American Physics Conference in—"

Derek cut him off. "Yeah, you and five million other people. That's like bragging that you won a prize in a box of Cracker Jack."

"You weren't even there," Quinn shot back.

"Because I was somewhere doing actual science. You spend more time doing outreach than doing research."

Seibert jumped in at this statement. "Outreach is an important part of the growth of any department. You shouldn't turn your nose up at it."

"With all due respect, Arlo," Derek said, in a bit of familiarity that didn't seem to please Seibert, "a department that depends on enrollment has to knock on doors and, I dunno, hand out candy bags at High School Day. But this is Physics. We run on G-R-A-N-T-S. You don't get moolah from eating continental breakfast at kiddy conferences."

"It also can't survive on a researchers too arrogant to participate in the wider community," Quinn retorted.

"Whip 'em out and measure 'em," somebody mumbled at the far end of the table. Chuckles spread around the table.

"And I guess you think you're keeping the department afloat single-handedly." That remark came from Hank Banks, an unfortunately named researcher in Optics. He worked with Leonard.

"Well, you laser guys sure ain't," Derek said. He took another healthy sip off his drink. His girlfriend, pushed against his arm, a gentle admonition to let up some. He ignored it.

"Oh, shove it," Hank said. "I've had seven publications in as many months, am a principal investigator on five grants—count 'em, five—and—"

"Oh, big whoop!" Derek said. "My research group and I have had twenty-two publications in the last year, and I'm on track to securing a grant from the Department of Defense for over five mill—"

Before he could get the words out small voice came from further down the table.

"Imbeciles."

All heads turn to Sheldon. He looked up from scratching a dried patch of cheese off his tie.

Derek looked at Sheldon, effectively baited. "Excellent!" he said, chuckling heartily. "The illustrious Dr. Sheldon Cooper wants in."
"I want no such thing," Sheldon said, nonchalantly sitting up erect.

"I do. You're the favorite child around here, right? I like a good challenge. What've you been up to lately?"

Sheldon looked down at his plate, supremely bored. "Research. As always."

"Yeah, but what research?"

Sheldon looked up at his would-be opponent. "You might recall that I am a theoretical physicist with a focus in string theory," he said, evading a direct answer.

"Yeah, but I also recall that you were on track to release something 'exciting' in July and then… nothing. What happened? Forgot to carry a one?"

What happened is he had become involved with the "project," the most exciting thing he'd ever sunk his teeth into that was masquerading officially as—sigh—an outreach initiative.

"I've put the matter on hold while I pursue other areas of interest," he said, suddenly wishing the conversation would come to a swift end. The last thing he wanted was to tap dance around a façade of a program. He looked at Amy and she seemed to be thinking what he was thinking. He stole a look at Dr. Seibert, who was subtly sending him signals to change the subject as quickly as possible. He finally turned to Lise-Marie, the other person at the table who was aware of the precarious topic at hand. If he hadn't known better, however, it looked like she was diverting her eyes.

"Dr. Cooper's been involved with the Outreach Initiative," Lise-Marie announced. Sheldon looked at her with pure shock.

Derek fell into unbridled laughter. "You're in that?"

"I have a loose affiliation with it, yes," Sheldon said. Derek's mirth only intensified. Sheldon was not so amused. "I see you find that humorous."

"Yeah, I do. What is that, anyway? A field trip Washington, DC that turned into a career?"

"My career is not defined by this single endeavor," Sheldon reasoned. But there was no reasoning with the man, and Sheldon's ire was mounting. A quick glance at Lise-Marie would have shown that she was privately giddy with the development.

"Wow. Getting soft in your old age, Sheldon?" he asked.

"No, just more courteous," appeared a female voice. It was Amy. All heads turned to her.

Derek was glaring. "Look, your old man can fight his own battles," he said. "He doesn't need—"

"What he doesn't need, nor does anyone else at this table, is an egomaniacal bully tooting his own horn and attempting to derail an otherwise perfectly pleasant dinner. In case you haven't noticed, you are surrounded by professionals of all stripes, none of whom feel obligated to participate in such juvenile peacocking. It makes one inclined to believe that you have something to hide."

Derek was not pleased at being so handled, and snorted derisively. "Sheldon, I'd really hate to disrespect your wom—"

"Then don't," Sheldon said.
A silence fell over the table. Derek managed to rally just enough of his remaining faculties to realize that Amy, and not himself, had the support of the gathered crowd. He nodded once, polished off the rest of his wine, licked his lips, and then rose from the table. "It was blast as always, guys. Don't drink and drive. I'll see you bitches on Monday." He nodded to his girlfriend. She rolled her eyes and stood as well, lifting her boyfriend's forsaken coat jacket from the back of his chair, and followed behind him.

Finally, apparently, Lise-Marie decided to provide some direction to her own party.

"For those of you who would like to remain a little while longer, there is a chocolate fondue inside to clean your palate."

As everyone rose to venture back inside, she eyed Amy. She had to get Sheldon alone.

Lise-Marie, relegated to being an absent hostess, ventured another look from where she was holed up in the kitchen. Far from the homely homemaker living in her husband's shadow, Lise-Marie had discerned over the course of the night that Amy was a reputed neurobiologist, an old acquaintance of many in attendance, and—most dauntingly—an avid and vocal champion of Sheldon. As if to put salt in the wound, she was also smoking hot. Lise-Marie's original notion of intimidating Amy into lending out her mate "in the name of science" was a long shot. She would never win in a head to head with this woman. So, she had to get Sheldon by himself.

Which was easier said than done.

"Merde," Lise-Marie said under her breath when yet another opportunity escaped her. Waiting until Monday would be waiting too late. She had to secure his standing, and thus her own, tonight. Amy had neutralized a potential Sheldon meltdown at dinner, ruining her chances to get Sheldon in the compromised mindset that made him most susceptible to influence. And now the woman was trailing him all night. Or rather, he was trailing her. For a man that never talked about his girlfriend, they were shockingly clingy, never leaving each other's side, engaging in lively debates and furtive private conversations. Didn't the man ever have to go to the bathroom? When one of the servers re-appeared in the kitchen, she grabbed his arm.

"I'll give you forty bucks if you spill white wine on Dr. Cooper."

"Who?" the young man said.

"The tall gentleman with the multi-color tie."

"Oh, him," the server said. "He doesn't drink… and gave me a long lecture on why not."

"I did not ask you to intoxicate him. I merely would like you to spill some wine on him. Just a little."

The server seemed hesitant.

"Fifty dollars," Lise-Marie offered, upping the ante. He still wasn't budging. "One hundred." She was greasing his palm, but there was something else gnawing at him.

"I might get in trouble with Hannah," he said.

"I will handle Hannah," she responded. "You just take this glass,"—she lifted her glass of wine—"and spill it on him. Then apologize profusely and lead him back to the kitchen to clean it up with club soda."
"What if he doesn't' come?"

Lise-Marie threw back her head, fatigued. "Double or nothing. If you fail to get him back here, you get nothing."

"But if I do I get him back here I get 200 dollars."

Lise Marie nodded. The young man took the glass from her hand, and slipped behind the kitchen door. Lise-Marie watched the choreographed scene unfold through a slit in the door. The server tapped Sheldon on the shoulder; Sheldon rejected it with a wave of his hand, the boy reached to take someone else's empty glass, 'accidentally' knocking the glass on his tray onto Sheldon. The server dissolved into apology (not enough, she thought, but he was no actor) and insisted, over Sheldon's objections, that the physicist accompany him to the kitchen. As they drew nearer, Lise-Marie panicked, grabbing a rag, and pretended to wipe the counter. A second later, they burst in.

"What happened?" she said, feigning shock.

"This young man spilled wine all over me, despite my repeated indications that I do not drink," Sheldon said.

"I apologize, ma'am," he said, again too calmly, and left the kitchen. She mentally shook her head, but continued in the charade. She grabbed a bottle of club soda from the refrigerator, pouring it onto a cloth napkin.

"I am so sorry, Sheldon," she said, dabbing his tie and shirt. "I hope this has not ruined you evening."

"Well, it has been a low point, but my evening remains un-ruined. It's worth mentioning, however, that a high point was the chocolate fondue. That was simply delightful."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said, smiling. "Although, I believe another apology is in order."

"How is that?" Sheldon asked.

"Derek's behavior tonight was unpardonable. His attacks against you were wholly unfounded."

"Well, Amy gave him the short shrift. I believe he was properly chastened. "With a Nobel Prize in hand, his pompous boast will be rendered weak indeed."

"Oh," Lise-Marie said, solemnly. "You haven't heard." She doused more club soda on the rag.

"Heard what?"

"There will be some cuts next week. I'm sorry to say, but… unless you procure a visa somehow miraculously in the next few days, I believe you will be among them."

Sheldon looked incredulous. "I highly doubt that. Seibert would have said something."

Lise-Marie pressed her lips together into a knowing look. "Seibert doesn't know."

Sheldon turned away, surprised. "Then how do you?"

She walked over to the sink, running water over the napkin. "I spoke with my colleague at the LHC," she lied. "I asked if she could look into the matter, as a personal favor. Her news… wasn't good."
"Is she a reputable source?" Sheldon asked.

"Absolutely, or I would never have even sought her help." She put the napkin in the sink, and wiped her hand on a towel. She drew closer to Sheldon, placing a hand on her arm. "If you noticed that I've been avoiding you this evening, that's why. It has been difficult to look you in the face knowing what I know."

Sheldon stumbled away, truly bothered by this news. Lise-Marie tried to remain cheerful.

"There will always be another chance to win the Nobel Prize," she said casually... an absurd assertion that Sheldon clearly found unsettling. "You are so intelligent after all." Honestly, she was growing tired of such brown-nosing conversations. Why didn't he just say 'yes'?

"That's highly doubtful," Sheldon said. He turned to her. "Additionally, I need this position. I need... the income."

"Oh?" Lise-Marie said. It was a surprising confession.

"I have some upcoming, personal expenses." It was all the explanation he gave.

"How unfortunate," she said, bringing her hand down the length of his sleeve. "Of course, there is a solution to this problem."

Sheldon looked at her, almost pained. "I am aware," he said.

"My original offer still stands, Sheldon," she said. She leaned closer to him, while looking away, her voice a whisper. "Just say yes."

Sheldon walked a few paces, not saying anything for a very long time. So long, in fact, she assumed she'd hit yet another dead-end. The agony of silence was too much to bear, and she moved to the sink, wringing out the wet napkin to dispense with her nervous energy. But when he turned back to her, she saw something different in his eye. Something had shifted.

"What would the lawyers say?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "They are held to secrecy by client confidentiality. Besides, Fineman's neck is on the line. He wants this visa more than you do, I assure you."

"And Gablehauser?"

"It is his custom to do as he is told, without concerning himself with the details. With a green light from the lawyer, he will wipe the sweat from his brow and go home to a game of poker and a bottle of scotch."

"And Seibert?" he said absently.

"Seibert is a man who, let's say, can think outside of the box. His 'fund-raising' techniques are infamous." She chuckled. "Let me handle him."

She could see him turning the matter over his head. His breaths were shallow and his eyes softened at the thought, and if she were close enough to take his pulse, she was sure it was dropping with each passing second. He was warming to the idea, and each of her calculated words eased him closer to saying yes. She stared at his lips, almost willing the word to come from his mouth.

And then something broke.
He shook his head.

"What about Amy?"

"Of course, you would talk the matter over with her first," Lise-Marie said. "But if she is the woman you say she is, and a scientist no less, I'm sure she would see the importance of this to you… and humanity." Her tone became more encouraging. "By making this decision, Sheldon, you would be investing in your future, both financially and career-wise. That security is one of the greatest gifts you could give your family."

He looked at her—clearly torn—but she knew it, and he knew it too.

The answer was yes.

"I'll see you out there," she said, and left.

Sheldon appeared behind Amy as she was looking at a tapestry on the wall. She turned around.

"Where did you get off to?" she asked, clutching her empty wine glass.

"I had a spill," he explained, staring down at his wet shirt, "I had to clean it up."

"Oh dear," she said, running a finger down his tie. "Thank goodness it happened so late in the evening. I was not so lucky." She turned back to the tapestry. "While beautiful and intricate, her home seems to be not so much decorated as curated, as if it were a museum."

He nodded half-heartedly, not really having an opinion. "Are you ready to go?" he asked in a way that sounded like, "I'm ready to go."

Amy nodded.

"You are fit to drive?"

She lifted her glass, wiggling it in her hand. "I just had the one."

He nodded.

"Let's get out of here," she said. But then, she spotted someone. "One moment," she said, handing him her glass as she walked off.

Lise-Marie turned around to see Amy headed her way. The latter woman held out her hand.

"I am Amy Farrah Fowler," she said, and rather brightly, Lise-Marie thought, for the late hour. "I don't think we've had the privilege of meeting, which is all the more curious, since this is your home."

Lise-Marie rubbed the back of her neck. "Curious, indeed," she said, and then took Amy's hand. Amy shook it firmly.

"You have a lovely home," Amy said.

Lise-Marie swallowed. "Thank you." She was finding it difficult to maintain eye contact. "I trust you enjoyed yourself."

"I did," Amy assured her. "You left no stone unturned. The raclette service, in particular, was a
"Thank you," Lise-Marie said, plastering on a weak smile that looked suspiciously like a sneer. The word "delight" echoed in her mind. It was the same word Sheldon had used. Fucking twins.

Sheldon walked up behind Amy a second later, bearing her clutch. Amy took it from him.

"We'll be on our way." Amy said with a warm smile and held out her hand once more. Lise-Marie accepted it with the same enthusiasm she might accept a poisoned snake.

Sheldon just nodded his goodbye, as did Lise-Marie.

In the car, Amy took a deep breath as she started the ignition. "So that is your 'babysitter,'" she said.

Sheldon nodded. "In the flesh."

"If I didn't know better, I would have thought she was avoiding me," Amy said. "She's also much younger than you let on," she added.

Sheldon didn't acknowledge the comment. He seemed so very tired. "I'm glad to be going home," he said.

Amy nodded, shifting the car into drive. "Then let's get you there," she said and pulled off.

Upon entering the apartment, Amy walked directly to the bedroom. Sheldon followed her, but he took a detour into the kids' room.

She stood in the mirror, looking at herself one more time. The curls in her hair had fallen some and her lipstick was largely faded. Her feet hurt, of course. But she still looked good.

Sheldon entered the room a moment later.

"Was it off?" she asked. They'd been running a humidifier in the twins' room for a week, hoping to ward off whatever respiratory problems Aditi may be potentially battling. She'd had a couple colds and a bout with bronchitis, and they hoped neither would return. At any rate, they weren't sure if they'd turned the machine off before they'd left for the evening.

"It was off," Sheldon said, taking a seat in a chair not too far from the bed. Perhaps he was thinking, or maybe just unwinding.

Amy sat on the edge of the bed, unfastening her heels—one then the other—then her earrings. She rose, placing them in her jewelry box. Next, she took off her hose, delicately lowering one side and then the other, as she slid the sheer fabric down her legs, careful not to draw a snag. Folding them and placing them on her vanity, she then removed her bracelet and stood on tiptoe, dropping it into a bowl sitting high on the shelf. She had just reached both arms behind her back to undo her necklace when Sheldon suddenly appeared behind her.

"Allow me," he said. She lowered her arms, feeling his large fingers working the delicate fastening of the clasp. Then she felt the necklace drop, and turned her head slightly as she reached around and lifted it from where he held it outstretched in the palm of his hand.

"Thank you," she whispered. She went to place it with the bracelet, but was halted by Sheldon's hands, again at the nape of her neck, gingerly tugging on the zipper to her dress, pulling the teeth
apart slowly and carefully, as if he were unwrapping a gift. The zipper ran long, all the way down to her lower back, and when it was completely open, she felt Sheldon's hand there—two fingers, maybe three—tracing a circle against her skin. A chill ran up her spine. Then two hands, one on each shoulder, and his breath against her neck. One hand left its place, and she could feel him pulling the elastic from her hair, sliding it down the length of her ponytail until the hair fell free. At this she turned around. She looked up at Sheldon; his eyes were already trained on hers and he was giving her that look. The look known to every woman who had ever been desired and adored by a man. But this look was from her Sheldon, and this look was for her.

"You were very pretty tonight," Sheldon said. He rarely told her so, and she knew that she had a man that gave little priority to her physical appearance. It had never really bothered her, since his sentiments appealed to her feminist-leaning ideals. But still, hearing him say so… wasn't bad.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He raised one hand and cradled it against her cheek for a moment, carefully studying (admiring?) her face, her eyes. Then, barely parting his lips, he brought his lips to hers. He kissed her gently, but long, as if breathing were a luxury he could do without, so taken he was with the feel of her mouth against his. When he finally did look up, there was something in his eye like… hurt. Amy found it startling.

"Are you okay?" she asked. He didn't answer, and then the look was gone as if it had never been there. Placing a hand on either of her shoulders and his forehead to hers, he pushed the straps of her dress down until the dress fell from her body, collecting around her feet. She stepped out of it, and pressed herself—virtually nude—against Sheldon, who was fully dressed save for his missing tie.

"Amy," he said wistfully, tucking her hair behind one ear. He took her face in both hands, kissing her fiercely, unlike before. His mouth travelled from her lips, then along her jaw, then under her ears. As he took her face for his own, she moved her hands to his belt, unfastening it, before moving on to his zipper. His pants fell around his feet. She moved on to his shirt, but was stopped when he started moving backwards, sitting on the bed. He pulled off his shoes and then his pants hurriedly, anxious to get the job done and get back to showering her with more adoration. Now, in just his briefs from the waist down, he took her hand, pulling her forward and in between his legs where he sat on the bed. He reached up with his body, and his hungry mouth explored her collarbone and décolletage. She leaned her head against his, clinging to his head and neck. He suddenly stood, looming over her as he dispensed with the final barrier to their union, inspiring her to do the same, and then he sat back down. Taking one of her hands, he tugged her forward, wordlessly inviting her to have a seat on his lap, and she did so, straddling him as they sat face to face. He still had his shirt on, which she found unmentionably hot, and she brought her face close to his, nose to nose, without actually touching, just savoring the moment and that look on his face. She smiled brightly because she really was so happy, and he did, too, and God she loved his smile. She kissed him again, as if the kiss were giving her life, and clung to him, closing the gap between their bodies.

She emptied her mind of every other distraction and preoccupation and responsibility and turned herself over to one, single, urgent thought:

Now.

When Amy got back from her shower, refreshed and rebooted, she found Sheldon in bed, only technically awake. She, however, was wired and feeling chatty. After sex, they sometimes had a bit of bedtime role reversal.
She climbed onto the bed, crawling over to where he was. She paused a moment, and he lifted his arm. She tuckered herself in next to him, her head and one hand lying against his chest. He reached up and turned out the lamp. All was quiet. It was well after one o'clock.

"I meant to tell you," she said. "The broker called today. We are almost out of escrow. We should be closing very soon." She sighed, wistfully. "Imagine; in two weeks we could be in our own home."

"Indeed we could," he said, drowsily.

"I don't even know when I'm going to prepare for my interview," she said casually. "Tomorrow you have your appointment, I have chores to finish, there are more boxes to go through and then Sunday will be here."

Sheldon didn't say anything at first. She could sense his body tensing; she looked up at his face.

"With Pasadena?" he asked finally, a bit sternly. She didn't miss his tone.

"It may lead to nothing," she said, almost regretting choosing that moment to bring it up. It had literally, simply crossed her mind. "It's just, I don't want to..." She sighed. Why were things so complicated? "I don't want to cut my hand short. I don't want to wonder years from now if that was my chance."

He said nothing to that.

There was silence. Long silence.

"I have to ask you something, Amy," he said, suddenly sounding a lot less tired and sitting up rather abruptly. She fell from him, leaning her arm on the bed. He reached up and turned the lamp back on.

"What is it?" she asked, frozen in anxious anticipation.

An eternal second passed between them as he stared at her, ominously serious.

"My Swiss visa for scientific researchers may take months, if not upwards of year, to receive, virtually excluding me from the proceedings. That is only if the collaborators and federal officials are even patient enough to wait that long."

"I know, Sheldon," Amy said. "You've told me before."

"But there has been a development." He stopped again, ever more agitated by the second.

Amy was growing wary. Sheldon's reticence was usually a foreboding sign. Perhaps he would have to be gone longer than she thought; maybe they would have to even move to Switzerland. He finally spoke again.

"Do you remember meeting Lise-Marie earlier tonight?"

It was a very odd thing to be mentioning.

"Yes," she said.

"She's offered to be of assistance in helping me procure my visa for the project."

"Okay."
He sat up completely and his voice grew stronger.

"She came to me. With a proposal. A way to… facilitate my participation much sooner."

"Right. And what might that proposal be?" she said, growing impatient.

"She suggested that she, through a civil legal arrangement, might be able to usurp the lag time associated with …"

As he prattled on, three words caught Amy's attention: Civil legal arrangement? That sounded a lot like…

"Where is Lise-Marie from, again?" Amy asked, and held her breath for the answer.

"Switzerland."

Amy turned away, and then looked back at Sheldon. "She suggested that you all get married?"

Sheldon didn't respond, just looked at her intensely, with wide eyes.

"And what was your answer?" she asked, breathless.

He shook his head slightly; his voice grew quiet. "I haven't… answered."

Both of them stared at each other for a long time. Amy was the first to turn away, then climbed away from Sheldon and moved to the foot of the bed, her back to him. Sheldon followed her, sitting right behind. She was…

Speechless.

"Amy," he said finally. "I fully comprehend why you may be hesitant to agree to such an arrangement." It was much more likely, she thought, that he didn't have a clue. "But this arrangement would simply be a legal construct that would have no bearing on the relationship that you and I share. We could manage it with the utmost discretion and confidentiality."

"Is this about the interview at Pasadena?" she asked. "Because I can cancel—"

"It's not about that," he said adamantly. He opened his mouth to speak, but sat groping for words in rare moment of inarticulation. "It's about…" He didn't finish.

"It's about what?" she asked, looking up at the ceiling and desperate for an explanation. It took several moments for him to answer.

"I made a promise," he said.

She finally turned to him, expecting (maybe even hoping) to see a man that was selfish, ambitious and devoid of any empathy. Instead, she saw something else: a nine-year-old boy, broken and battered, sitting on his front porch in the rain while he privately escaped a cruel, cruel world with dreams of science and fame and a life beyond his trailer park in East Texas. "You can't leave that boy behind," she whispered. Maybe it was a statement. Maybe it was a question.

He shook his head wordlessly, and it took him a moment to respond, but when he did so, his voice was steady and sure.

"No," he said.
Amy nodded. "Then, I won't stop you," she said. She saw his shoulders drop just a little, a subtle gesture of relief that was hard to watch.

"Thank you, Amy," he said.

She didn't respond but stood up and walked to the door.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"To the restroom. Don't wait up," she said, without turning around.

She got in the tub, pulled the curtain, turned on the shower, sat on the floor, and let the steaming water purge her of all she was feeling.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow – Amy Winehouse
Amy woke up to the sound of her name. She squinted against the bright light, and then lifted her head. It took a minute for her eyes to register that she was staring into Sheldon's kneecaps. She looked up.

"Good morning," he said.

She rubbed her face with one hand. She felt like she was coming out of a coma. Sheldon decided to proceed without receiving a greeting in response.

"I'm going to my appointment."

"How?" she said, finally speaking.

"By bus."

"Why not by bike?"

"Well, I'm getting a filling, so I imagine I'll be receiving some rather potent painkillers. I hardly think it would be wise to trust myself with operating heavy machinery. Or a bicycle."

Amy nodded absently.

"I guess I should take you, then," she said, still blurry eyed.

Sheldon shook his head. "No. Get your sleep."

She wanted to protest, but instead just fell back to the pillow. Sleep sounded like a good idea. She estimated that she hadn't fallen asleep until sometime around four o'clock. From the way Sheldon was breathing when she got back to bed, she figured he hadn't slept all that well either. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Ten-seventeen."

It was much later than she'd thought—shockingly later. She rarely slept past seven, even on weekends.

"Oh my God," she said, pulling back the covers and abruptly sitting up. "I should have been up long ago. Did you get the twins from Leonard and Penny?"

"Yes," Sheldon confirmed.

"They're likely hungry," she sighed.
"I already fed them oatmeal," he said. He looked at his watch, then back at Amy. "I really must go," he said. Then he looked at her expectantly.

She nodded, collapsed back down to the pillow, turning her face to the opposite wall. There would be no goodbye kiss this morning.

Sheldon nodded and walked off. Amy heard the bedroom door open then shut. A couple minutes later she heard the front door do the same.

Her fluffy comforters and pillows were beckoning her back to sweet slumber, while the guilty mother in her was urging her to check on her young brood. The bedding was winning until she heard the TV turned up very loud. Were those gunshots she heard?

Leaving her bed, she made her way to the living room, where she found Aditi and Robert sitting in front of the TV.

"Mommy!" Aditi squealed gleefully, standing on the couch and jumping up and down.

"What are you watching?" she said, rushing for the remote on the coffee table and lowering the volume. It was some violent cartoon suitable for someone four times their age… if not older.

"You can't watch this," Amy said, fumbling to change the channel to something more age appropriate. "You'll have to watch something else." She flipped through the channels and landed on reruns of *Dora the Explorer*. "Here, watch this."

Robert was not happy. "I don't want to watch this," he whined. "I wanna watch the other one."

"It's too violent and that's final," Amy said. "Watch Dora and Diego."

Robert fell to the couch dramatically. "I don't wanna watch this. I wanna watch the other one," he repeated.

"Look, look," Amy said, trying to sound enthusiastic, "you can learn some Spanish."

"I like Spanish," Aditi said. "Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, nueve..."

Robert was not so easily appeased, and fell into a flat out wail, crying loudly into a couch pillow. It was giving Amy a headache.

"Please, stop crying, Robert," she said. "Robert," she called again, but he was descending into being inconsolable. He wasn't like this often, but when he didn't get his way, there was no reasoning with him. Amy had an idea of where he got it from. "Robert, Robert, Robert," she pleaded.

At her wits end, she went to the kitchen, scouring the cabinets for some candy. But she and Sheldon had a very strict policy about sweets and really didn't give the kids much candy at all. In fact, the only proper candy in the whole apartment was her PMS stash of chocolate. Reaching up for the top shelf, she reached into a bag of Ghirardelli squares and pulled out two handfuls, then marched back to the living room.

"Sit up," she told Robert. At the sight of the chocolate, he did as he was told. Aditi immediately sat down beside him. "Hands out," she said. Both kids held out their cupped hands, and she dropped the candy in their waiting palms. Robert was sniffling in the way that one does when one has recently been sobbing, but otherwise, he was suitably placated. Amy crouched down in front of them.
"Now, please do Mommy a huge favor and watch Dora, okay?"

"Okay," Robert whimpered.

"Do not change the channel. Please be quiet. Mommy needs to rest. Okay?"

"Okay," he whimpered again.

She looked at both kids. "Don't get into trouble, okay?"

Robert nodded, while opening a chocolate square.

"I'm not going to get in trouble, Mommy," Aditi assured her.

"Alright?"

They nodding absently, already distracted by the television and chocolate.

With that, she walked back to her bedroom and collapsed onto the bed. It passed her mind that she had likely never felt so tired in her whole life. The comforters felt amazing and the pillow was like sleeping on air. All that was left to do was to close her eyes and get some rest.

But she couldn't. She was too wracked with guilt. Since when had she been the type of mother who slept all day, rewarded disobedience with candy, and allowed her kids to be babysat by the television? She tried to push it away and focus on the ethereal comforts of the bed, but it was no use. She sat up again, pulled an afghan off a nearby chair, and walked back to the living room. She motioned for the twins to scoot over, which they did. Putting her feet up under her, she sat down and draped the afghan over herself.

"That's Daddy's spot," Aditi reminded her with a mouthful of chocolate.

"Daddy isn't here," Amy said. Glancing down at her daughter, she took one of the bars of chocolate from her lap and opened it up, taking a bite. Then she leaned her head against the armrest, and tried to watch the cartoon.

Beverly had closed her private practice and began taking one-time clients in "crisis situations" as a way to go into semi-retirement. She had never had intentions of stopping work completely while sitting back on her laurels, dreaming of yesteryear and getting fat. Yet, the idea of a daily practice no longer interested her. Frankly, she got more fulfillment from being the psychologist on hand while the mayor hosted an intervention for his heroin-addicted nephew than she did from holding weekly sessions with persons who would live and die and never fully rid themselves of their childhood daddy issues.

However, as the weeks passed, she realized that there was something to be said for having a daily practice. It surprised her that there was a certain emptiness that lingered with her once the doors had closed. There was an aspect to that environment that could not be replaced by her new endeavors. After three weeks, she realized what it was.

She missed bossing her staff around.

Currently, Beverly was at home reclining on her bed, wearing an eye mask with the lights out, and holding a phone to her ear. Her voice was calm and steely.

"Shelby," she said, "honestly, I only ask you to do very, very simple tasks and yet you seem
incapable of receiving—and much less executing—the instructions that I give you. Now, am I to understand that this is simply a matter of incompetence, in which case I could simply dismiss you and find an employee who is more capable of completing the requisite assignments, or is this a deliberate attempt at sabotage, in which case I warn you that I am not an opponent to be trifled with lightly."

Shelby sighed. "I don't know. I just thought that since they were out of Baked Lays that Pringles would be good enough. I mean, do you want me to take them back?"

"Take them back? No. Learn from this egregious error and execute my desire with precision the next time? Yes."

"Fine, Beverly," Shelby said. "I won't make that mistake again."

"As for my tickets to Pasadena?"

"I did exactly as you said. Leaving in two days, at 6:00 AM out of Newark, flying into LAX with a first class upgrade using the frequent flyer miles on your Discover Card. I've reserved a mid-sized rental car with Avis, available upon your arrival, using your American Express." Shelby was rather pleased with herself. Beverly, of course, was not.

"And the gift?" she asked.

"The gift?" Shelby repeated.

"Yes, the gift. Would you have me arrive at the home of my son and daughter-in-law, as they prepare to give birth to their first child, without being able to present them with a gift apropos to the occasion?"

"Well, you didn't say anything about a gift."

"Shelby, Shelby, Shelby. You will soon learn that if you are to have any success whatsoever as my personal assistant it is absolutely imperative that you demonstrate a bit of initiative."

"Like when I bought Pringles instead of Bakes Lays?"

"That was not initiative, dear, that was tomfoolery, and you will be expected to know the difference."

Shelby sighed into the phone, reciting what was slowly becoming her mantra. "Fine, Beverly. I won't make that mistake again."

When Sheldon exited the building of his dental appointment, he found Amy parked outside waiting for him. He walked over to the car.

"Hello," he said when he got in. He turned around; both kids were sound asleep in their car seats.
"Thank you," he added, as he put on his seatbelt.

Amy nodded, and pulled out of the parking lot. "Would you like to grab lunch on the way home?"

"I would," Sheldon said. "Although I can't eat for an hour."

They drove until Amy pulled into a Boston Market drive-through and ordered a family chicken meal. They waited in the line that led to the window to pay. Sheldon looked straight ahead out of the windshield, uncharacteristically quiet. Amy watched him a while. He glanced at her a second
then back ahead. She turned back at her purse to find her credit card.

Everything felt very… awkward.

"When are you going to do it?" she asked.

Sheldon shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't," —long pause—"spoken with her yet."

More silence. Amy pulled up to the window.

"That'll be $25.00," the woman said. Amy handed the woman her MasterCard, and the woman lowered a bag full of food down through the window. Amy waited for the transaction to clear. Without turning to Sheldon, she spoke again.

"I would like to talk to her," Amy said.

Sheldon nodded. "That can be arranged," he said. "When?"

"Today," she said.

Sheldon nodded again. The cashier returned.

"Here's your card. Thank you for coming to Boston Market. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"I'll try," Amy said, and drove off.

Raj was at Howard's house sitting on the couch. He had been brushing up on his strategy, working on his focus, and getting himself into fighting shape. Honestly, he'd never felt better. It was if his entire life had been leading to this moment: the eye-staring competition.

"You're going down," Raj said, literally unblinkingly.

"Yeah, whatever," Howard said. "I can see it in your eyes. You're already wavering."

"I'm not wavering," Raj proclaimed. "I shall never waver."


"What are you doing, dude?" Raj said.

"Dust. Solar flare. Me kicking dirt in your face."

"Stop that," Raj said.

"It's psychological warfare," Howard explained. "Eye-staring is not a contest for the weak of mind."

"My mind is not weak. My mind is strong. Like a bison or a wallaby," he said, his eyes twitching.

"A wallaby?"

"They have very strong hind legs to facilitate strong ki, ki, ki, ki—"

"Is that an almost blink I see," Howard said, growing more excited with each passing moment. "Just do it. Blink. Blink. Blink."
Raj's eyes were twitching and his eyes were burning. What had happened to his iron will? His relentless training? His ardent passion? His 12-hour eye drops?

Then the worse happened. He blinked.

"AAARRRRGGGGHHHH!" he cried, his fists clenched in agony.

Howard and Bernadette were jumping up and down.

"That's right!" Howard said, sweeping up Adam in his arms and giving him a high-five. "Taking down the weak and making Daddy proud. That's my little man."

Adam smiled in a way that seemed to smug for a two-year-old.

"It wasn't a fair fight," Raj yelled. "He has teeny, tiny, little baby eyes! I can't compete with that."

"Oh, cry, cry, whine, whine," Howard said. "You knew the rules going in. You can't complain now. Just admit it: you just got beasted by a two-year-old."

Raj growled, glaring at his tot-sized opponent. "You have not seen the last of me, Adam."

Smiling, Bernadette disappeared in the kitchen. She returned with a chocolate éclair ice-cream bar. She rustled Adam's hair and kissed him on the forehead.

"Here, baby," she said, handing him the ice cream. "You deserve it."

Adam took it excitedly and chomped down into the chocolaty treat.

Raj stared at the ice cream bar, licking his lips. "Can I have one?" he asked.

"BACK OFF, LOSER!" Bernadette said. Howard nodded smugly and the couple high-fived.

Lise-Marie was sitting at the table trying to remain focused on the conversation before her, knowing an interruption was imminent. On the advice of an acquaintance, she'd called Attorney Richards—who insisted on being called Michael—requesting a meeting. "Not in the office," she'd explained. "Somewhere else." Here they were, having a dinner, and there was a decent chance he thought this was a date. Their conversation was light and frothy, and he was pretty easy on the eyes. She found herself laughing a lot. Even so, between their entrée and dessert, she planned to get down to brass tacks. There were a few legal matters that she needed… clarification on.

She felt a tap on her shoulder. It was the maître d'.

"Dr. Zurbriggen?" he asked. She nodded. "There is someone who would like to speak with you in the lobby."

"Thank you," she said. The man walked off. "Excuse me," Lise-Marie said to the attorney and pulled the napkin from her lap, placing it on the table. "I will be back shortly."

Ever since she had gotten Sheldon's text message earlier that day, she had been dreading this meeting, but wanted to have it in a public place where she had a chance of taking control. At least she hoped she would.

She stepped out into the lobby. There was a woman standing there, her back to Lise-Marie.

"Amy?" she called.
Amy turned around, and frankly, Lise-Marie was surprised at what she saw. She recognized Amy's glasses, but the rest of her outfit was more fashion-challenged than the one she'd been wearing the night before. Amy was donning a green and white striped cardigan over a flower print blouse, with a knee-length denim skirt and thick-soled oxfords. Lise-Marie totally got the hipster glasses, but not the rest of the ensemble. She wondered if Amy was one of those urbanites who wore their clothes ironically.

She just couldn't figure this woman out.

"Hello!" Lise-Marie said, walking forward cheerfully. She leaned in close, preparing to bestow the other woman with a kiss on both cheeks, but Amy pulled away, and held out her hand. Getting the point, Lise-Marie gave her a cordial handshake.

"I did not come here for a social call," Amy said, as if there were any remaining doubt. "I believe that we need to have a conversation."

"I hope this is quick," Lise-Marie said, her previously cheerful façade already fading. "I was rather enjoying my dinner."

"With a date?" Amy asked, maybe hopefully.

Lise-Marie chuckled, looking down. "No."

Amy nodded. "What are your intentions with…" She had never said it out loud, and it was harder than she thought. "With marrying Sheldon?"

Lise-Marie returned a look of confusion. "I am sorry. Sheldon informed me that he had already made you aware of the purpose of this arrangement."

"He did," Amy said. "But he is unable of telling me what your intentions are. Which is why I am asking you directly."

Lise-Marie paused a beat before answering. "I sense a hint of accusation in your voice."

"I sense you are evading the question."

Lise-Marie collected herself, renewing her focus. "Very well then. Amy, I do not know if you realize what a gem your… well, whatever he may be to you, he is a gift to the science community. I frankly will do whatever I can to ensure that he can accomplish his scientific ambitions uninhibited. Yes, even if that means being in a sham marriage that no one knows about. I'm sure you feel the same way."

Amy didn't miss the jab. "We are—"

"I know, I know," she interrupted dismissively. "Partners, lovers, girlfriend and boyfriend."

"We're in a committed relationship," Amy said. Her already thin patience was waning even more. "He is the father of my children."

Lise-Marie sighed then turned away. When she turned back, her brow was furrowed and she looked perplexed.

"I was under the impression that Sheldon and you viewed marriage as an anachronism, an archaic gesture of pageantry. But you seem to be assigning greater importance to it than that."
The words rattled Amy. That had always been her public stance on the topic, but this was all beginning to take that stance to its most extreme conclusion.

"Our civil status doesn't mean that I see marriage as a matter to be taken lightly."

"Dearest Amy," Lise-Marie began, infuriatingly patronizing, "Sheldon and I have spent long hours working together, alone. We even stayed at the same hotel once. If I had intentions of defiling your 'committed relationship,' I would have pursued that course then."

"What is missing from that statement," Amy said, growing upset, "is a commitment on your part to respect what Sheldon and I have."

"Amy, we are grown women. I believe I can be frank with you. If you deny Sheldon the freedom to take advantage of this legal arrangement, you are not only endangering his career, the future of human progress in chaos theory and his chance at winning the Nobel Prize, but you would be denying your family the economic security that will enable you to pursue your dreams as well. You have a reputation as a respected neurobiologist and a fine mother. I think you have more pressing concerns to worry about than any imagined infidelity on my part."

Amy didn't say anything. Lise-Marie knew far more about her domestic situation than she had realized. How much had Sheldon told her? Just what was the nature of their relationship?

When Amy failed to respond, Lise-Marie nodded once.

"If there is nothing else," she said, and turned to leave. She had taken a few steps when Amy called to her.

"There are other ways," Amy said.

Lise-Marie paused without turning around. "There are other ways of what?"

"There are other ways of taking what is not yours," Amy said.

Lise-Marie turned, taking a few steps. "And what might those ways be?"

"You can take the part of him I love the most—his confidence."

Lise-Marie laughed. "He is nothing if not confident."

"No, I mean his trust. His intimacy. Who he shares his secrets with. Who he relies on. I will not surrender those things, Lise-Marie. Those things belong to me."

Lise-Marie turned back around and drew closer; she smiled with her mouth turned to one side. "I do not understand the source of your mistrust. Has Sheldon shown some… interest in me?"

"Of course, he hasn't," Amy spat.

"Then… there should be nothing for you to worry about. I am sure if he is finding that all his needs are met in the home front that he will not have to seek fulfillment elsewhere."

Amy's mouth dropped.

"I have a dinner to get back to," Lise-Marie said.

"My friend was right," Amy said.
"How so?"

"You are a bitch," she said, and left.

When Amy got home, Sheldon was anxious to find out how the conversation had gone. He stood up anxiously from the couch at her entrance.

"What did she say?" he asked.

Amy stormed past him headed towards the bedroom. "You'll marry her over my dead body."

Thrown into an instant panic, Sheldon followed her in hot pursuit.

"Why? What happened?" Sheldon asked.

Amy thought of the kids in the next room. Her voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "She showed a complete lack of respect for our relationship, and insinuated that I wasn't fulfilling your needs."

"What needs?" Sheldon said. "Food, clothing, shelter? Childcare?"

Amy shook her head, stewing, and tossed her purse to the vanity. "Sheldon, she is a bitch who doesn't even have the common decency to—"

Sheldon cut her off, gob smacked.

"Amy, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that, unlike you, I don't trust her as far as I can throw her. She is trouble, Sheldon, and you would do well to cut all personal ties with her immediately."

"You are absolutely, wrong," Sheldon asserted. "Her qualifications as a scientist are questionable, but she recognizes my genius and—"

"PLEASE, SHELDON!" Amy said, louder than she intended. "Even Penny could see that she is an untrustworthy character."

"Penny?" Sheldon said, growing upset. "Did Penny put you up to this?"

"Of course not," Amy said.

"Then why have you suddenly changed you mind?"

"Because I've just now talked to her. I can see that she has ulterior motives and cannot be trusted. I cannot give my blessing to a—"

Sheldon shook his head. "You have allowed whatever jealousy you may be experiencing to cloud your vision to the point that you would deprive me of the ambition I most seek."

"Sheldon," Amy said, drawing closer. "You must believe me when I say that there is nothing I loathe more than standing between you and your dreams, and I believe there is no one who understands more what winning the Nobel Prize means to—," But Sheldon broke in.

"That is impotent rhetoric, Amy," he yelled.

"You are too loud," she said.
"You know that without this I am all but cut from the team."

"Then you will just have to be cut."

"How can you say that so calmly?" he said. "What about the house, Amy? What about my work to date? I had a major discovery just days ago!"

"I don't have answers, Sheldon, but this is not the solution. She's manipulated your mind into exaggerating what this opportunity means. Surely there must be a way for us to achieve our goals without threatening our family."

Sheldon shook his head then snatched his jacket from the chair.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To prove you're wrong," he said and marched out of the room. She followed him.

"And how do you plan on doing that?" she said.

He left without another word, shutting the door behind him.

Penny watched Amy as she fumbled through her purse for Aditi's antibiotic. Something wasn't adding up. Amy thought Sheldon was at Lise-Marie's house; Penny got that part. But… why? And if he was, what did Amy think Sheldon was going to do? Penny could barely picture Sheldon having sex with Amy, much less anybody else.

"Even if—" She looked down at the kids playing on the floor and rephrased the question. "Even if A and S got into a, you know, F," she said, "why would S go to LM's house?"

Amy shook her head. "It's complicated," she said.

Penny watched as her friend dropped to the floor, looking under the couch for the fifth time. Penny looked around for the bottle herself, suddenly spotting it on top of the stereo. "Is this it?" she said.

Amy let go a sigh of relief and stood up. "Yes it is. She has to take that in an hour. One pill. It's chewable." She walked to the table, grabbed her purse, checked to see if she had her keys, and walked to the door. Penny stopped her.

"Amy, my journey to Leonard was littered with every scumbag this side of the Mississippi and, trust me, I've done this more times than I can count," she said. "But there is no way this is going to end well. You're just going to end up driving yourself crazy or, worse, seeing something that you really don't want to."

Amy reflected a moment and tried to entertain the notion of patiently waiting for Sheldon to come but… couldn't.

"I have to know, Penny," she said. Know what? She felt so frantic. It was too painful to even verbalize. "I just… I need you to do this for me."

Penny could see her desperation. This wasn't Penny's battle, or her relationship. All she could do was support Amy. She nodded.

"Thank you," Amy whispered. She walked towards the door, throwing a sweater over her shoulders as she did, and left.
Aditi and Robert, in a rare moment of calm, stood next to each other staring at Penny with quiet apprehension. In their little minds, they had sensed the tension of the moment, though (fortunately) not much else.

"Is Mommy sick?" Aditi asked.

"Of course not!" Penny said, with all the cheer she could muster. "She had to run out and buy something." She clapped her hands together and tried to crouch in front of them, then thought better of it. "So what do you guys have planned for Aunt Penny tonight?"

They looked at each other, wondering what they could play.

"Can we play Mexican jumping bean?" Robert asked. This particular game consisted of them jumping around with reckless abandon while Penny tried to save the furniture. While the game carried the benefit of wearing them out enough that they went to bed without a fuss, she didn't feel like having another incident where the neighbors called the police.

"How about something a little quieter?" she suggested.

"Can we play hide and go seek?" Aditi asked.

While it sounded good on paper, Penny remembered that the last time they'd given that game a whirl; she ended up searching for Aditi for two hours before she realized that the girl had somehow climbed on top of the fridge and covered herself with a towel. Then fallen asleep. In yet another near-miss police incident, she'd woken up just as Penny was on the verge of filing a missing person's report.

"Um, let's keep thinking," she said.

Aditi and Robert kept looking at each other, then their faces lit up in the synchronous way that only happened with twins.

"BOGGLE!" they yelled in unison, jumping up and down. Penny slumped.

"But you guys pick hard words," she whined. She hadn't beaten them yet and, frankly, she was tired of feeling stupid.

Robert sighed. "Then that leaves Candyland," he said, less than enthused. Penny, however, made up for whatever zeal he lacked, and practically leapt at the idea.

"Now you're talking!" she yelped and grabbed the game from under the coffee table. She opened the box, setting up the board. "I call dibs on the green guy."

Amy had been parked outside of Lise-Marie's house for ten minutes, patiently waiting to be proven wrong. She looked out at the statue of Perchta by the front porch with sigh.

Fifteen minutes had gone by, and she began to chastise herself for even beginning this mad pursuit. She had children at home to care for and things to attend to. She had an interview in the morning. Why was she here in the dark, parked outside some woman's house, dreaming of ways to terrify herself?

Not a minute later, she got her answer.

She watched as Sheldon pulled up to the yard, parking his bike by the front porch. He ascended the
stairs and rang the doorbell, one, two, three times. She imagined him whispering "Lise-Marie" under his breath. Several moments passed and the door opened. Lise-Marie greeted him with a kiss on both cheeks, and welcomed him inside. Amy's heart sank as she watched the door shut behind them.

Penny was right. She had to get out of there. She had to go. She didn't realize she was trembling until she tried to put the key in the ignition.


Entering, Sheldon looked around at the foyer where he had been just the night before. It had seemed invitingly hospitable at the party but, at that moment, it seemed intimidating and overwhelmingly spacious.

"Would you like something to drink?" she offered. "I received a scotch as a hospitality gift at the party that I've been dying to open. I do hate to drink alone."

"No, no thank you," Sheldon said. "It is not my intention to stay long."

She nodded. "Then how may I help you?"

Somehow, standing back home in his living room, Sheldon had imagined that this entire mission would play out in a scene with two lines: the curtain would rise, he would scoff at Amy's sinister imagination and then Lise-Marie would vigorously deny that she had anything but the noblest intentions of science and scholarship. [End scene, exeunt.] However, standing there, it seemed foolish that he should have ever come at all. Perhaps a text message would have been more appropriate.

"Sheldon," she repeated. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Yes," he said, clearing his parched throat. "But first… can I have that beverage?"

Lise-Marie nodded. "It would be my pleasure." She walked towards the living room. Sheldon… followed.

Chapter End Notes

For my readers from Great Britain, awesome job on the Opening Ceremonies; it's looking like it's going to be a great Olympic Games. To everyone else, hope your athletes are all repping your countries proudly, whether they make it to the podium or not. GO WORLD!

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Jolene – Dolly Parton
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Robert is brave.

Lise-Marie looked at Sheldon as he droned on about the logistics of the following Monday's nuptial ceremony and other business related to their research. She wondered if he ever turned it off. As if he had read her mind, she got her answer: she noticed his eyes drifting to areas of her body where they ought not.

Not that she had a problem with that.

"Sheldon," she interrupted. He looked up at her eyes. "Surely you think a break would be in order."

"A break?" he asked hesitantly. "I hardly need a break from this work. It's the most important thing to me. It's what I live for."

"Well then, surely you can at least give your wine another chance," she said. "You've hardly touched it."

Sheldon looked down at the glass that was taunting him again.

"It is a delectable wine imported from Europe," she said.

"Switzerland?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said. "Switzerland is not known for its vintners. This one is from France. My father gave it to me for my birthday."

"Then I would hate to partake from a gift that was meant for you."

"Ridiculous," she said in that accent that was so fetching. She drew closer, taking a seat next to Sheldon. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to share it with... someone I admire so much." She lifted the glass from the table and then brought it to Sheldon, inches from his face. Eyes heavy, and not immune to her carefully chosen perfume, he turned to her before taking the glass from her hand and having a sip.

"That is... delectable," he said, breathless and weak.

"Have more," she urged, staring at his lips. He did so. Taking the glass from his trembling hand, she also took a sip before "accidentally" spilling some down her blouse. Some of the droplets rather gracelessly puddled in her plunging décolletage. "Clumsy me," she purred, before taking one finger, swiping up a drop and licking it from her finger. She dabbed at another droplet and brought her wine-soaked finger to Sheldon's mouth. Tossing aside the germophobia that usually gripped him, he brought his lips around the tip of her manicured digit.

Then, she replaced her finger with her mouth. After just the slightest hesitation, Sheldon pressed against her, and they fell into feverish kisses.
"Mommy," he said.

"Mommy?" Lise-Marie repeated.

"Huh?" Sheldon replied.

"You're scaring me, Mommy," Lise-Marie said.

Then Sheldon grabbed her, shaking her.

Amy sat straight up. It took her a moment to register her surroundings, and then she realized that she was at home, in bed. There were four eyes staring at her, and they all were stunned.

"Did you have a nightmare?" Aditi asked.

Amy supposed she had. She was profoundly relieved, and a little embarrassed.

"I think I must have," she answered, breathlessly. "Did I scream?"

Robert nodded. "But that's okay. I'm used to saving people from nightmares. DeeDee has them all the time, but I'm brave."

Amy couldn't help but laugh, and then reached out for her daughter and then her son, cradling them in her arms.

"I'm fine," she assured them after a moment. "Don't worry."

"Do you need us to sleep with you?" Aditi asked. "That will make it better. I promise."

Amy looked at the empty spot next to her, then back at the twins.

"I would like that," she said. With characteristic glee, they leaped into the bed and wasted no time in making themselves comfortable. Staring at the loves of her life, Amy snuggled in too, and tried to go to sleep.

Sheldon had still not quite made it clear why he had stopped by. Lise-Marie had a nagging suspicion it had to do with her and Amy's acrimonious conversation from earlier in the evening. After she had offered him a seat and glass of scotch (the latter of which he adamantly rejected for a glass of water), she went to the restroom. When she returned, he was sitting there, looking through a folder on the table.

"The vows," she said.

Sheldon looked up, as if he'd been caught. He cleared his throat. She walked over to her bar and poured herself some of the scotch. If she waited on having company, she may never drink it.

"I said words very similar to those to a man once. In French, of course."

"You're married?" Sheldon asked.

She shook her head. "Divorced."

"Why did you get divorced?" Sheldon asked.

"I did not love him. I was a young girl and immature. I saw my wedding as a grand party, and it
was. The marriage, however, was foolish."

Sheldon found that notion absurd. "Your father was not upset?"

"He advised me against the union. But I did not listen." She grinned to herself, a bit sadly, and took the folder from his hands. "I am afraid my second marriage will carry more purpose than the first, even if it is not real. I would much rather say these words to you."

Sheldon didn't respond immediately, and there was a long pause. She took a seat next to him on the couch and saw him stiffen in the corner of her eye. When she looked up, Sheldon was looking at her gravely, if not through her.

"Are you in love with me?" he asked.

She snickered to herself, and then took a sip from her scotch. "Would you like me to be?"

Sheldon thought about Penny and Leonard and Amy. "I want you to tell me the truth."

She sighed, and placed her scotch on the table. "The truth is I need this marriage as much as you do."

Sheldon didn't understand. "Why? You can travel freely between the two countries."

"I know, but…" She paused. "Can I tell you something?"

His shoulders dropped. "If you must."

"I was not the one in my family who was supposed to be a physicist. It was my sister. She excelled in the sciences. But she met her untimely death in grad school, in a freak skiing accident. I was 16 at the time, and was devastated by her death, but I just remember... something broke in my father. Even after he stopped crying openly, his grief never ended. There was a perpetual gloom in our home. I think that may be why I got married so soon after graduating. However, my marriage failed within six months and a divorce decree was issued two months later. I moved back to my father's home. His sadness had only deepened in my short absence. It was then that I promised him that I would be the scientist my sister couldn't be, and I enrolled in school. He was comforted, somehow. Slowly I saw the light return to his eye. It was like my sister was living in me. Through me."

She stopped there, a sadness settling over her. She looked at Sheldon. He was unmoved.

"I fail to understand how that story answers the question of why you need this marriage as much as I do."

Lise-Marie rolled her eyes. "Because after years of study, I somehow I fought my way into getting a job at the LHC, my lifelong dream. However, I have been renowned there for the wrong reasons: for my parties, for my fashion, for my looks. Everything but for the real reason I am there: to perform great science. So when I got this opportunity, to work with Sheldon Cooper on one of the great projects of our times," she paused, looking away. "It seemed too good to be true. And so it was."

"How so?" Sheldon asked.

She looked back at him. "Three weeks ago, the LHC asked Dr. Seibert to 'justify my presence' here at Caltech. Without you to vouch for me and explain my importance to the project, I could be back in Geneva doing smalltime work in a cubicle this time next week."
Sheldon turned away, looking at the far wall. His face was inscrutable.

"What is it, Sheldon?" she asked.

Sheldon turned to her. "So you proposed this marriage so that you wouldn't lose your position," he replied.

"Of course not," she insisted, placing two hands on his arm. He looked at them with uneasiness, and she pulled away. "Believe me; I am sincerely honored to be working with you. It would be a miscarriage of justice if you were dismissed from the project. That is how I truly feel."

He turned to her with doubt in his eyes. "Amy seems to believe otherwise."

"Amy is mistaken," she insisted. "She misunderstood some things I said earlier today. I felt awful when she walked away before I could make my meaning clear. Perhaps we could meet again and clear the air."

Sheldon shook his head, retreating from the conversation. But she had to have her answer.

"Sheldon," she said, urgently. "You must answer me this: What do you think of me as a scientist? Can I count on you to advocate for me to Siebert as I have so faithfully advocated for you?"

Sheldon barely paused before answering. "I think the LHC is wise in recalling you to Switzerland."

She looked at him in disbelief, crushed. "But you told me you thought I was critical to this project."

"I believe I said you had assisted me in some critical ways. You certainly help me get the paperwork done faster."

"Paperwork? Faster?" she repeated, completely deflated. Her bottom lip began to tremble and she placed a hand over her eyes, turning her grief-stricken face from him. A tear ran down her cheek.

"Why are you crying?"

"Are you really that dense, Sheldon? That naïve? I just confessed to you my entire struggle, my goals, my dreams and you just…" She walked off and poured herself another drink. "How can you be so cruel? So calloused?"

"I gave you the truth."

She took a sip from her drink—her hand was trembling—and then took a deep breath, sweeping away the puddle of tears that had collected on her chin. She brushed down her skirt and gathered herself.

"Fine," she said, clearing her throat. "I am a professional. I got this far because I have always been able to put my feelings to the side and get the job done. So, let us proceed with our original plan." She walked over to where he was on the couch and, suddenly formal, picked up the folder and began to show Sheldon a typed itinerary with notations. "Seibert will be in San Diego on Monday morning, so we should take advantage of his absence to get this done. I'll pick you up from the bookstore in Fairville Center at 8:00 on Monday morning and from there…"

As she spoke, Sheldon looked at the paper, staring at the lines of text until they began to fade together and the page went completely white.
"I don't want to do this."

She sighed. "Of course you don't. Nothing is good enough. We can change to a later time, or try another courthouse, although based on the research I've done on the wait times in Glendale—"

"I mean I don't want to get married," Sheldon said.

Lise-Marie shook her head several times, closing her eyes. "What are you saying?"

Sheldon rose. "I should go."

She rose as well, growing frantic. "Sheldon, surely you jest. We need you on that project. And what about your career? Are you just going to turn your back and walk away from—"

"I plan on speaking to the lawyers again and seeing if there has been any progress."

"But Sheldon, there hasn't been. They already said—" She started to protest and then just stopped. She was exhausted, discouraged and emotionally drained. "Nevermind," she said, shaking her head. "It is your life. You are free to do as you please."

With one final look, Sheldon turned and left for the door.

"I will see you on Monday, then," she called after him.

"Yes, of course," he said. She heard the door open and close.

From the couch, and sitting on her knees, she pulled back the curtain and watched as Sheldon pedaled away. She imagined him arriving home, greeted by a welcoming Amy at the door. She'd gloat in her triumph and laugh at Lise-Marie's misfortune as she and Sheldon cuddled around the fireplace. Sheldon would arrive to work and, with his luck, waters would part and he'd somehow ascend to ever greater heights as Lise-Marie descended into obscurity. The thought made her sick to her stomach.

She walked to the wall, turning out the light. She then sank to the floor with her back against the wall, placing her head between her knees. Why is this happening to me?, she asked herself. What am I doing wrong?

The answer came to her like a flash in the dark: she had planned her entire future around riding Sheldon's coattails, but he had just discarded his coat—and her with it. If she was going to get what she wanted, she was going to have to remove him from the equation entirely.

And that's exactly what she was going to do.

Sheldon saw himself to the door and walked out. His bike was where he had left it on the side of the porch, and he mounted it, setting out for home.

Twenty minutes later, as he walked the stairs to the apartment, however, he took each step with increasing dread. He had no idea how he would be greeted… or what he would say. He stood outside the apartment door a moment, hesitant to go in. He finally entered and everything was dark. The apartment was quiet.

He walked back to their room and gently opened the door. He saw his family all asleep in the bed. Exitng just as carefully as he had entered, he turned around and walked back out to the living room. He lay down on the couch, pulling a stray afghan over himself and tried to fall asleep.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Seibert is in San Deigo.

On days when she had things to do, Amy literally had to herd the twins through the morning routine. If not, she might come back and find that Robert had changed into a costume or Aditi was "helping Mommy" by making her own breakfast and destroying the kitchen in the process. Amy had one child in each hand, and was swiftly ushering them to the breakfast table.

"Hi, Daddy," Aditi said casually on her harried way to the table. Amy turned around, surprised to find Sheldon asleep on the couch.

He woke up slowly, stretching, then sat up. He caught Amy's eye—the first time their eyes had met since the night before—and it flickered with something that shocked him into wakefulness. She turned away, focusing her attention on putting Eggos in the toaster. He noticed the suit she was wearing, one he didn't recall seeing before.

"You have your interview today," he said.

"I do," she answered, preoccupied with the toaster.

A lot had transpired in the last twelve hours since they'd spoken; a lot had transpired that he was anxious to explain. He glanced at her as she worked with her head down, and then he looked at the kids. He rose and inched his way to the kitchen. "I could… assist you with breakfast. If that would be helpful."

"Yes," she said a bit facetiously, "that would be helpful."

He walked over to the sink, washing his hands while she warmed up syrup in the microwave. A second later, Penny walked through the door. Amy and Sheldon turned to her with a cursory glance and returned to what they were doing. Penny, however, seemed confused at the sight of Sheldon.

Aditi jumped from the table and ran over to her. "Aunt Penny!"

Penny picked her up, wincing as she did. "Good morning, champ!" she groaned.

"Good morning. Can I touch the baby?"

"Yep," she said, and took Aditi's small hand, placing it on her belly. The baby was squirming, and Aditi squealed with glee.

"So you don't need me now, Amy?" Penny asked.

Amy looked over at Sheldon, then back at the plates. "I suppose not."

Sheldon heard what wasn't being said. "Need you for what, Penny?" he asked curtly.

"Oh," she said, a bit awkwardly, "I was just going to, um, keep the kids. Just for, like, a couple
hours.

He responded to Penny, but was looking at Amy. "Why would you keep the kids when I don't have work today?" he asked.

"Because …" Penny began, but then stopped. "Well, the main thing is you're here now, so..."

"Can I have raisins on mine?" Robert suddenly asked.

"We're having Eggos, not oatmeal," Amy answered. Sheldon, however, had already reached into the cupboard and pulled down the box of raisins. Amy cut her eye at him. Silently reprimanded, he put them back. "I believe I can handle breakfast alone," she said. "Perhaps you can straighten up the living room."

Sheldon, effectively exiled from the kitchen (and with any chance of a talk with Amy fading), walked over to the couch and began violently snatching up toys and other items from the floor.

Penny watched him with some concern. "Sheldon," she said, "If you need me to keep the twins for a while, just until you… you know…"

"No, Penny," he said, standing up. "I don't know."

"While, you know, you cool off or whatever."

Sheldon stormed towards her, pulling Aditi from her arms. "Penny, I can take care of my own damn kids!"

Aditi looked at Sheldon then at Penny.

"Damn kids!" she yelled with unmitigated glee, throwing her arms in the air with a bright smile on her face.

"Nice job, Mr. Language Police," Amy said. "Breakfast is ready." She grabbed her purse from the couch, along with a portfolio, and left, slamming the door behind her. She left a disturbing silence in her wake.

"I guess I'll be going too," Penny said, and left a moment later.

The interview was going well. Even so, whenever the conversation diverted from raw science to small talk, Amy was put firmly outside of her comfort zone.

"I think American Airlines has really neglected the travel experience in recent years," Dr. Corbin said. "Of course, commercial air travel has been in steady decline for over a decade. It's honestly making me consider getting my pilot's license."

Amy thought that the purchase of small aircrafts were, for most persons, an ostentatious demonstration of wealth and—considering humankind's romanticized relationship with flight—a misguided way to stroke one's on ego. From a moral standpoint, it also showed a wanton disregard for the nation's continued struggle with a conservative use of non-renewable fuel sources. She kept those opinions to herself, however.
"How nice," she said.

"Yeah." Dr. Corbin said, and tapped the table with a pen. "So, Dr. Fowler," he continued, apparently returning to the purpose of their meeting, "why do you want to be here?"

This amounted to a trick question. Her respect for the institution on merit alone was metered. Pasadena was a solid, progressive university, sure, but Caltech loomed large over the local academic world. However, to be pursued in this fashion, beating out other candidates to make it to a final round of interviews, endeared her to the institution. She wanted to be wanted.

"I want to be here because I see a future for myself here," she answered.

Dr. Corbin nodded. "Honestly, besides being out of the field for a few years, you are our most qualified candidate. Maybe overqualified in some respects. How do we know that you aren't just biding your time until something better comes along?"

Amy contemplated her response. Would she be saying too much? "Because something better has already come along."

"Better?" he asked.

"With all due respect, sir, I've been offered a position at Caltech."

He was clearly surprised at this revelation. "Are you planning on accepting?"

She took a deep breath before answering.

Sheldon was seated on the living room couch, persuaded to sit on the middle cushion by both a persistent Aditi—who had recently become inexplicably obsessed with the spot—and a particularly intense case of despondency. His children sat on either side of him as he read to them a tale he'd read to them before, *The Wind and the Willows*. It was about the adventures of the beloved characters Ratty, Mole, Badger and—or course—Mr. Toad of Toad Hall. However, in this particular reading, something was amiss.

"The animal almost brushed him as it dashed past," Sheldon read, his voice clear and neutral. "His face set and hard, his eyes staring. 'Get out of this, you fool, get out!' the Mole heard him mutter as he swung round a stump and disappeared down a friendly burrow." Sheldon paused, turning the page. He noticed that Robert was staring at him with an inquisitive look.

"Why are you reading it like that, Dad?" he asked.

"Reading it like what?"

Robert shrugged, spinning the arm on his Batman toy. "I don't know. Different," he answered.

"Yeah," Aditi agreed. "Usually you read it all jumpy." She descended from the couch and proceeded to start jumping up and down.

"I'm afraid that 'jumpy' is not a specific enough descriptor. Please return to your seat, Aditi," he said. Seeing "his spot" vacant was too tempting, and he slid over into it. She sat down on the other side of him.
Sheldon resumed reading. "The pattering increased till it sounded like sudden hail on the dry leaf-carpet spread ar—"

He was interrupted by the sound of Aditi whining. "I don't like it when you read it like that," she said, her lip poked out. She slid all the way down on the couch until she was practically reclining.

"I don't know what you are referring to, Aditi," Sheldon said, losing patience.

"Like when you do the voices," Robert explained.

"I like it when you do the voices," Aditi concurred.

Frankly, the thought of "doing voices" exhausted Sheldon.

"I like it when the two of you don't interrupt," he said. "I ask that both of you sit up and listen politely."

Robert sat up, as did Aditi, although she looked considerably more miserable. Her face was set in a hard frown and her arms were crossed. Her countenance made Sheldon inclined to stop reading altogether. He got his wish.

The knob to the front door began to rattle and a minute later, Amy entered the apartment with a Styrofoam cup from Jack in the Box. She paused a beat before proceeding directly to the kitchen. She had a small bag of groceries and commenced with putting items into the refrigerator. Sheldon followed her with his eyes, abandoning the book altogether.

Aditi started hopping in her seat. "Keep reading, Daddy," she insisted.

Sheldon looked at his daughter as if he'd forgotten she was there. The he handed Aditi the book. "Would you two please go to your room?"


"What about the book?" Aditi whined.

"Please," Amy said, closing the door to the refrigerator and opening up a cabinet, "don't stop on my account."

But Sheldon still rose and walked towards the kitchen. When it became evident that story time was over, Robert hopped down from the couch and walked towards his bedroom. Aditi followed him.

Amy continued to fiddle in the kitchen, avoiding eye contact.

Sheldon cleared his throat. "About last night—"

"I know where you were," she said tersely.

Sheldon was surprised. "How?"

"I had a sickening suspicion you'd gone to that woman's house. Sure enough, you proved me right."

Sheldon didn't say anything, and stood at the near end of the island, staring at Amy remorsefully.

"Sheldon," she whispered, looking down while pausing in front of the refrigerator door. She took several deep breaths. "I'm afraid to even ask you—"

"Our conversation was tense and ended in an impasse," he answered in reply to the question she
hadn't even asked. "I called off the marriage proceedings."

Amy snapped her head to him, trying to absorb that latest bit of information. "Why?"

Sheldon took a long while to answer, not breaking his stare. "I realized it would be an imprudent course of action."

"Imprudent," Amy repeated, disappointed with his word choice.

"You were right," he said, and she didn't miss the agony in his face. "She was using me for her own advancement."

"How did she take it?" Amy asked.

Sheldon shrugged. "She wasn't pleased. But no doubt she will come to terms with the news in short order. She has little choice."

Amy looked down, sadly. Despite this development, she didn’t feel any better. "I wish she would go away."

"She is," Sheldon said, eagerly taking a step forward, his fingers sliding down the edge of island. It was the only thing even approaching good news he had to offer. "She told me she would be gone by this time next week. She's been called back to the Collider."

Amy relaxed some, but was far from calm. "So what are you going to do about the visa?"

"I have no choice but to talk to the lawyers again."

They stared at each other silently for a long time.

"How was your interview?" he asked.

She nodded, then looked down in to her hands. "It went well."

He watched her face, clearly hoping she would let him know what she had decided to do, but he got no such feedback.

"Amy," he started again. She didn't say anything, but looked up at him. "I would like to… return to our former… standing."

"Standing?" she asked. "What standing?"

"Before…" He paused, groping for the word. "Before," he said, ending there.

Amy put her hands over her face, almost tearful. "I am so confused, Sheldon."

"Confused about what?" he asked, but she didn't answer. He walked closer to her, until he was right in front of her. Then he put his arms around her. She didn't move, didn't respond. "Are you mad at me?" he asked, above her head. She backed away.

"Dr. Corbin told me that I was by far their most qualified applicant they'd interviewed. If Pasadena offers me the job, I'm taking it."

"Why?" he asked, clearly disappointed with the news.

"Because I want to," she said. "Excuse me." She moved past him and towards to the bedroom. "I'm
exhausted, I'm going to sleep," she said. It was barely 5:00.

Sheldon watched her walk away, distressed and overwhelmed. Taking comfort in his spot, he put his head back until he felt a small hand tapping his knee.

"Daddy," Aditi said. "I'm hungry."

"I imagine you are," he said, and rose to start contemplating options for dinner.

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Siebert was in bed, lying flat on his back, breathing deeply. His girlfriend crawled back to the head of the bed, then kissed him fiercely. He was so spent, he could barely kiss her back. She smiled, biting her bottom lip.

"I love it when your face is like that," she said.

He just smiled back, lazily, fighting for his breath. "Wow," he finally said.

"Um, hmm," she purred as she lay down beside him, resting her head on her hand while the other caressed his bare chest. "So, you driving home and leaving me all by my lonesome?"

He reached up and kissed her. "I can't move, much less drive home. I'll head out in the morning like I promised." Just then his phone rang on the nightstand. "Leave it," he said.

"Well, it might be important," she said, reaching for his cell. She crouched above his body, a knee on either side of his torso. "Maybe it's your ex-wife begging for an increase in her alimony."

"In which case, definitely don't answer," he said. She looked at it quizzically. "What is it?" he asked.

"You aren't gay are you?"

"You don't know?"

She smiled a naughty smile. "Well, I thought I did, but why is a man calling you so late at night?"

"Let me see," he said, motioning for her to hand him the phone. The caller ID said "Gablehauser, Eric." It was alarming. "I have to take this," he said.

"Awww," she moaned, getting off of him. He sat up, his back against the headboard.

"Seibert," he answered. His voice cracked a little. He cleared his throat. His girlfriend listened passively as his voice reflected his growing agitation and disbelief. She glanced at the clock: it was after ten o'clock. "Well, tell her to hold off until we—Human Resour… Jesus Christ." He sat up and reached for his shirt. "First thing in the morning," he said.

"Are you leaving now?" she asked. He'd said he'd spend the night.

He cupped the phone. "An issue came up that I have to handle."

"No," she said, poking her finger into her chest. "You promised me. Plus, you owe me."
He looked at her, clearly torn. Besides, starting on a two-and-a-half hour trip home was the last thing he wanted to do at that moment. He put the shirt down, but he still hadn't committed to staying. "Well then you hold the meeting. I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow morning," he lied. "With my urologist."

She smiled widely and rewarded him with a kiss on his neck. He wrapped an arm around her body, and she rested her head on his shoulder until he hung up.

"Thank you," she said, cuddling against him more.

"Sure thing," he sighed. He kissed her on the crown of her head.

Sheldon usually welcomed Monday morning and a return to work, but this Monday morning suddenly brought to mind all those pop songs about the drudgery of a new work week. Little did he know, the worst was yet to come.

He got an email from John Spencer. "Please report to Human Resources immediately," it said. Sheldon checked the time stamp. The email had been sent only moments before. Sighing, he rose from his chair and made the walk across campus.

It was beautiful this time of year. The summer sessions had ended and there were very few students on campus. The occasional lizard or bird crossed his path, and even though it was hot, there was a breeze that made it bearable. He was soon at his destination and went in. As soon as he walked through the door, the receptionist spoke up.

"Dr. Cooper?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The third office to the right."

Without a word, he went back. The door was ajar and he peeked in. Lise-Marie was there with a suited gentleman at her side. There was a woman at the head of the table that Sheldon vaguely remembered as the Director of Human Resources. Dr. Gablehauser was there, as well as Attorney Fineman. What is this? He walked in.

"Dr. Cooper," Dr. Gablehauser said without greeting. "Have a seat."

Sheldon did so.

Gablehauser looked at Lise-Marie and then back at Sheldon. He deferred to the HR Director. "Mrs. Simon?"

She nodded. "Dr. Cooper, you should know that this discussion is being recorded."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because, in the regrettable chance that this cannot be handled through an internal resolution, this conversation could be used in official legal proceedings."

"What is going on?" Sheldon demanded. He turned to Lise-Marie. "What have you done?"
"Please refrain from addressing my client," said the man to her right, and it was becoming clear he was her legal counsel. He gave Lise-Marie a sympathetic look.

"And you are?" Sheldon asked.

"Attorney Richards," he said with a perfunctory nod. Sheldon instinctively turned to Gablehauser.

Gablehauser took a deep breath. "Dr. Cooper, it has been brought to our attention that Dr. Zurbriggen alleges that she has been a victim of harassment on your count."

"Harassment?" Sheldon said derisively. "That implies that I desire to be in her company."

"Dr. Cooper," Mrs. Simon said, "please be mindful that this conversation is being re—"

"Recorded. I'm fully aware of that," Sheldon said. "I have absolutely nothing to hide. In fact, I would be fascinated to know what evidence could be brought against me. I was an invited guest to her home just three days ago."

Her attorney spoke up. "A fact that my client readily admits. But she says that, since that time, she has been the victim of harassment on your part that has threatened her sense of well-being."

Sheldon turned to Lise-Marie. "Please, Lise-Marie. Enlighten me as to how."

"Did you come to her home uninvited on Saturday?" Attorney Richards asked him.

"Indeed I did. She welcomed me in."

"A fact she also doesn't dispute. However, she says that upon entering, you became angry and violent."

"If that was the case, why didn't she call the police?"

"She did. Upon arriving, the police found various items in her home smashed and knocked over. She says that when you realized that she called law enforcement, you left. The fingerprints on a glass matched those that were recovered from you when you spent a few hours in jail for contempt of court."

Sheldon took a cursory glance at the paper before turning to Gablehauser with an incredulous look. "You can't believe this! What would be my motive?"

"Well, there is also some evidence that your significant other approached Lise-Marie while she was having dinner earlier that evening. The restaurant hostess says the conversation was heated."

Sheldon said nothing. For the first moment, he was realizing that she had actually constructed a story that was actually believable.

"Is this true, Dr. Cooper?"

Sheldon started breathing heavily.

"Dr. Cooper?" Mrs. Simon asked.

"It is true," he said.

"There is also this email."
Subject: Visa concerns
From: Cooper, Sheldon
To: lise.marie.zurbriggen@cern.ch
Date: 08/18/19 03:14:09.258 AM

Dear Lise-Marie,

In spite of my initial misgivings, and the issues regarding my current domestic situation, it is my desire to pursue matrimony as a legal course of action.

Sincerely,
Dr. Sheldon Cooper, PhD

"It's not the most romantic proposal I've ever seen, but my client maintains that she has never had any romantic interest in you and was disturbed and—quote unquote—'creeped out' by this email. Would you have an explanation for this?"

Sheldon considered explaining that, in an act of marriage fraud, he was trying to circumvent the legal visa process in order to get into Switzerland. He looked at Lise-Marie and for the first time since he'd entered the room, she looked at him with a knowing look, as if she was visually daring him to tell the truth. He knew that revealing their original plan would likely get him in deeper trouble—if they believed him at all.

The room took his silence as an admission of guilt.

"In the face of this preliminary evidence against you," Dr. Gablehauser said finally, "we will have to put you on paid administrative leave until an official hearing can be conducted and this matter is resolved."

Sheldon shook his head. "I have a family," he said.

"And you will be receiving your salary," Gablehauser assured him.

Slowly, he scanned the room: Mrs. Simon, Attorney Fineman, Dr. Gablehauser, and then Attorney Richards. Finally, he looked at Lise-Marie with all-consuming panic that was quickly becoming rage. In an instant, Lise-Marie had gone from his innocuous collaborator to the embodiment of Evil. It was as if the raw malice of every person on his mortal enemy list had been distilled to its purest form and drained into her veins. Glancing over at Gablehauser, he had somehow morphed into her mindless henchman. Sheldon was stricken with an image of himself, grabbing the table and turning it over. He wanted to cuff up Gablehauser and throw him up against the wall. He wanted to snatch the Physics Bowl trophy from the wall and smash up everything in sight. He wanted to quit.

But he couldn't this time. He had people in his life, people who were counting on him and needed him to have this job. Without a word, he stood up and walked out.

"Dr. Cooper!" He heard yelling behind him, but didn't stop. He marched past the receptionist and out into the hall before Gablehauser caught him. He called to Sheldon sternly one final time.

Sheldon turned around, his jaw clenched.

"It deeply grieves me to tell you this, but due to the demanding and relentless schedule of the project, coupled with your visa issues…" He couldn't even say it.
He didn’t have to. Sheldon understood loud and clear that he’d been cut from the project.

Gablehauser sighed regretfully. "We just didn't have any other choice."

"And I guess you've found my replacement."

The question clearly made him uneasy. "A search will be conducted. You colleagues will perform your duties in the interim."

"You mean Lise-Marie?" Sheldon said, disgusted. Dr. Gablehauser didn't respond. Sheldon looked around. "Where's Siebert? I guess he finds his romantic interlude with his girlfriend in San Diego preferable to attending to his responsibilities here."

"San Diego?" Gablehauser replied, confused. "He has a doctor's appointment."

*Just another lie*, Sheldon thought and walked off.

Sheldon made the same walk back to the Physics Building that he had made just minutes before, but he was not taken with its natural beauty nor the tranquility of a sparse campus. Instead, a gloomy pallor fell over everything. The world seemed to be in black and white. Upon entering the building, he walked past his office and went directly to Leonard's lab.

"I need you to take me home."

Leonard looked up from his work. "Sure. Meet me here at five."

"No," Sheldon said emphatically. "Now."

Leonard could see it was something serious. He put down his pencil.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Penny and Leonard aren't churchgoers.

Chapter Notes

Blame the Olympics for my absence. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

The ride home from work was violently quiet. Despite Leonard's subtle invitations that Sheldon share the source of his distress, Sheldon was absolutely silent, only saying "Thank you," before alighting from the car. He was barely to the door when Leonard took off on his way back to the University.

When Sheldon got into the apartment, he saw Amy standing in the kitchen; she was talking on the phone. Robert was most likely in his room, and Aditi was on the couch reading a book while ignoring the muted television completely. Without breaking her conversation, Amy looked at him quizzically.

He walked over to her, drawing uncharacteristically close. She backed away, almost imperceptibly, then leaned her back against the island as she continued her conversation. After a couple more exchanges, Amy hung up the phone and walked off several paces, busying herself with stirring whatever was in the pot on the stove.

"I didn't realize you were coming home for lunch," she said, not exactly excited about it. She imagined that it was probably one more of his silent efforts at redeeming himself. She didn't know if it made her a bad person or not, but she really wasn't ready to move on, to just forget, to just pretend like Lise-Marie never happened. She had one of the longest, most difficult weekends of her life, and even though she was only halfway through Monday, the old adage that there was "no rest for the weary" was looking truer than ever. Amy pulled four bowls from the cabinet and placed them on the counter, then turned to Aditi.

"Go tell your brother that lunch is ready and then the both of you wash your hands."

Aditi skipped off merrily. Amy ladled vegetable soup into the bowls. She could feel Sheldon standing right behind her.

"Amy," he said, his voice trembling, but she turned away.

"Maybe later," she said, not even sure of what she was declining. She picked up the full bowls from the counter and walked them to the table. "That was the school," she said, as she walked. "A spot opened up for Aditi. She can go to school if she wants."

"Public school?" he asked.
She nodded.

"And so it is decided?" he asked.

"I don't know, Sheldon. I don't know. I've read website after website, and there is so much conflicting advice. Every scenario is a godsend and a nightmare."

A second later, Aditi reappeared, stopping next to the couch. "Robert said he's not hungry," she announced then looked up. "Can I eat, anyway?" she asked.

"Of course," Amy said. "Though he needs to eat as well." Then Amy paused a moment, thinking. Leaving the table, she walked over to where Aditi was standing and crouched in front of her. Aditi looked at her expectantly. "Aditi," she began. "Do remember the school where you went to take those tests with the blocks?"

Aditi nodded merrily. "Yep. They had a xylophone and that lady was nice."

Amy smiled a little. "Would you like to go to that school?" When Sheldon realized what was happening, he drew closer, standing just a little behind Amy.

Aditi thought a moment with great earnestness. "Is that the school where the children get to ride the yellow school bus?"

Amy shrugged. "I believe there is a yellow school bus."

Aditi swallowed, still deep in thought, and then begin again. "I want to ride the big yellow bus."

Sheldon and Amy looked at each other.

"You mean to tell me," Sheldon said, surprised, "that the deciding factor in your childhood education is the means by which you get there?"

Aditi looked at him with no understanding.

"Aditi dear," Amy said. "What about the school? Did you like it?"

"I think so," she said, possibly completely devoid of any basis on which to even make a decision. "Robert wants to ride on the yellow bus, too. It's really big and it has a red stop sign. And the seats are really big. We both can fit on one."

Amy's heart was in her throat. She took a deep breath and stood up. She and Sheldon had put off informing Aditi—both children, really—the reality of their educational prospects. While telling them that they might be going to different schools sounded difficult on paper, looking into her daughter's bright eyes full of dreams of riding to school with her brother made telling her seem like one of the most difficult pieces of news Amy would ever deliver. She paused a moment and collected her thoughts, but just as she parted her lips to speak, Sheldon spoke instead.

"Aditi, thanks to your highly-contested test scores," he began sardonically, "while your brother will be attending one of the most illustrious childhood educational institutions of the greater Los Angeles area, you will be have to sift through the dross of a well-reputed, though inferior, public school, in an admirable attempt to piece together an education. It's a scenario, I might add, which everyone—except me—seems to have no problem with."

"Sheldon!" Amy fired back, as much for his delivery as for his insinuation about her views of the matter.
Aditi clearly had no understanding of what he said, but his tone sent her into panic. "What's happening?" she asked.

"You and Robert will not be going to school together," he said.

Aditi didn't say anything for a moment, her face blank and still. Then, she took a deep breath and wailed, exploding into heart-wrenching tears. A second later, Robert ran out, his eyes wide and looking terror-struck at his sister's sobbing.

"YES WE ARE!" she screamed back.

Her unforeseen reaction of pure grief horrified Sheldon and he looked at her, frozen with terror.

Robert pulled a tissue from the box on the end table, and handed it to his sister.

"Don't cry, DeeDee," he said.

Amy stooped down in front of her. Aditi leaned her head into Amy's shoulder, and Amy pet the back of her daughter's hair. After another several moments of sobbing, Aditi's tears quieted some and she gasped for her breath, rubbing her tear-stained face and eyes.

"Clean you face like a big girl, okay?" Amy said.

Aditi nodded and blew her nose. Amy glanced up at Sheldon. He arguably looked worse than Aditi and was almost trembling. He looked at Amy, then Aditi, then Robert, and marched off towards the bedroom. Amy lifted up Aditi and placed her on the couch, then got a Popsicle from the fridge and handed it to her.

"What about Robert?" Aditi asked through her tears.

Amy regarded her son for a moment. "He'll get one when he agrees to eat lunch," she said, then headed back to the bedroom.

She found Sheldon in the room pacing, fretful to the point of distraction. He looked like he might literally come out of his skin.

"Your daughter is in the living room right now, crying."

"I'm aware of that, Amy," he replied, severely distressed.

"Then don't you feel some kind of obligation to go and correct that matter?"

"If only it were that simple," he said.

"It is. You've enforced an apology or two between the children before. I thought you would know how to execute one when it was your turn."

"Amy, she is horrified by a reality that frankly appalls me, and I don't have another truth to offer her."

"Please, Sheldon," she said. "That's just an excuse for you to retreat and feel sorry for yourself instead of properly asking for forgiveness."

Sheldon stopped pacing and looked at her. "You know, I'm suddenly baffled as to what happened to the strict, disciplinarian Amy? Suddenly, now that I'm the one eliciting tears, I'm the worst father in the world."
"No one's calling you the worst father in the world, but you hurt her feelings and you should do something to make amends. She's too young to even articulate what she's feeling, but now she she knows that somehow she's not good enough to go to the same school as—"

"No, you think she's not good enough," Sheldon said. "That counselor thinks she's not good enough. I think she is a brilliant child that is being robbed of what she deserves."

"Do you? How did you come to that conclusion? Did you get a degree in childhood education? Maybe juvenile psychology? Are you trained in administering IQ tests?"

"No, but I am a genius and I have been one my entire life. I know another one when I see one."

Amy drew closer. "Aditi is a bright, engaging, very smart little girl who, in less than five years on this planet, has managed to capture your wholesale adoration, and you are jeopardizing your relationship with her by not accepting her for exactly who she is."

"No one will EVER accept her for who she is!" he yelled. "And the quicker she learns that the better!"

Amy took a step back at the outburst and paused before answering. "Is this about Aditi, or is this about you?"

"Of course this is about Aditi. Don't change the subject."

"So, I don't accept you for who you are, Sheldon?"

"I feel like all around me I have to be apologetic for my scientific ambitions. I am first and foremost a scientist, and I—" he started, but Amy cut him off.

"I REFUSE to hear it," she said fiercely. "That tired old line is your cowardly retreat from the fact that you owe us, Sheldon. You owe us engagement. We come first. Not science. Not your ambitions. And not… her."

Sheldon was shaking. "Amy, my life is out of control."

"My life is out of control too, Sheldon!" she yelled back. "You think I'm living on a resort in Cancun?"

"YOU can't even begin to comprehend what I've…" He stopped there. He still hadn't stopped soon enough.

"I dare you to say 'sacrificed.' You haven't come nearly as far as I have. I haven't even worked in five years."

"Which I tried to help you with and you rejected all my assistance."

"I didn't want your pity, Sheldon, I wanted your support."

"Oh, so I'm unsupportive now. Do the accusations from you know no end?"

"Because it's all about you! But God forbid that you would take five minutes to see life from my perspective and see what you can do to add a little permanence, or stability or security to my life."

Sheldon was gutted by the insinuation. "It all comes back to that with you, doesn't it?"

Amy didn't respond. Sheldon soldiered on.
"You know what?" he replied, his voice breathless and strained. "You said *yes*, Amy. I came to you *first* and you said *yes*. And now, after the fact, you act as if I made some unilateral decision—"

"If I had even thought about coming to you for permission to ask to marry somebody else," she said, her voice growing louder, "had I even introduced the *concept* to you, you would have had an aneurysm!"

"If you found the idea so repugnant you could have just said no," he replied. "I wish you had, it would have been a lot easier than—"

"But I *couldn't* say no, Sheldon. How could—"

"Easily," he shot back. "N-O. It's a two-letter word."

"Could I have? And watch the life drain from your eyes? I couldn't bear it."

"Well I can't bear this, AMY!" Sheldon shot back.

The statement infuriated Amy. "WELL I CAN'T BEAR THIS EITHER!" she yelled. "We've all suffered, Sheldon." She shook her head. "We've all suffered."

He didn't say anything just looked at her, his former guilty face returned.

She looked away. "Perhaps you should just go back to work. I have quite a bit of work to do, and I'm sure you do, too. We can start again later."

"I can't go back to work," he said plainly.

Amy suddenly met his eyes, clearly baffled by this statement. "Why not?"

He swallowed without answering, then abruptly left the room.

"Where are you going?" she said and followed after him.

He walked over to where Aditi was seated on the couch and stooped down in front of her. Her eyes were still moist and her breath caught every now in then, like anyone who had been recently sobbing. But she was giggling and writing with Robert.

"I'm sorry, Aditi," Sheldon said, his voice weak.

She looked up at her father cheerfully. "That's okay," she said, and returned her attention to the oversized notebook on her lap. "Did you know that Robert and I are writing down all the fruits in the world?" she asked.

"I know a lot from Asia," Robert confirmed. "Especially kumquats."

Aditi stuck out her tongue until it poked out a little in the corner of her mouth. "Daddy, how do you spell 'kumquat'?"

But Sheldon, hugged her instead of answering, and tightly, perhaps a bit too tightly. He closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I'm so, so sorry." It was then that Amy could tell that, somehow, something was wrong.

"Sheldon?" she asked, some anger still around the edges of her words. But he didn't respond, and the embrace was starting to run long. Aditi started to writhe a little in his arms, her own arms pinned against her chest. "Sheldon," Amy called again, more firmly.
He looked up at the sound of his name and pulled away. Then he stood up and, without another word, wandered off back to the bedroom, leaning against the wall as he went. Amy watched him go with mounting concern. When he was out of sight, she regarded her children once more, checking to see if they were at all disturbed, but instead they sat smiling and engaged, occupied with recalling the names of various fruit.

When she got back to the room, she found Sheldon on the bed, lying on his side in the fetal position. The early afternoon sun flooded through the slits in the blinds, and striped his body with alternating bands of light and shadow. From the door she spoke to him.

"What's the matter, Sheldon?" she asked. She got no answer, and so went around to his side the bed, stooping beside him. She looked into his troubled eyes, and was surprised to find them moistened by silent tears. Her mind went back, with a sudden understanding, to his repeated attempts to talk to her in the kitchen. "What is it?" she asked. "Why did you come home?"

It's then that he lifted his eyes to hers. "Amy," he said. "There's something I need to tell you."

Dr. Seibert looked up at the presence standing in his doorway. Not surprisingly, it was Dr. Gablehauser.

"I called you several times," Gablehauser said.

"I left my Bluetooth thingy at home," Seibert replied, rather flippantly. " Didn't want to talk and drive at the same time, you know."

Bullshit, Gablehauser thought, but didn't say. "Well, I figured you would like to know how the meeting went."

Seibert sighed deeply and put down his pen, fully committing to the conversation. "I would."

"The lawyer did most of the talking. Sheldon was, surprisingly…" He couldn't put a finger on the word he wanted to use.

"Not calm, was he?" Seibert asked.

"No, not calm. But he didn't fight back, really. At first he did, but then he just walked out."

Seibert was visibly surprised. "You think he actually did it?"

"Who knows?" Gablehauser said, but he was shaking his head. "I guess he could have. She does have evidence."

"Yeah, but," Seibert said, pausing in reflection. "I can't imagine him harassing somebody. He acts like he can barely tolerate humans at all, much less chase after one. This is the guy where, every time he mentions one his kids, I'm shocked all over again. I mean, where did they come from?"

"Yeah, well," Gablehauser said, "we're setting the hearing for as soon as possible. Like you said, we don't want to drag this out."

"Great," Seibert said, approvingly.

Gablehauser nodded and headed to the door when he turned around. "Oh, before he left, he had some choice words for you."

"For me?" Seibert said.
"Yes. He somehow got in his head that you were in San Diego with your girlfriend. I told him you had a doctor's appointment."

The statement arrested Seibert's attention, but he tried to hide his surprise.

"Right. I'm glad you set him straight," Siebert said, nodding for good measure. He began to fidget with the items on his desk. "Well, I have work to get back to."

"Of course," Gablehauser said, getting the message. "I'll be going." With that he left.

When he was gone, Seibert stopped what he was doing altogether and stared at the door, stunned to the point of distraction. How the hell did Sheldon know he had been in San Diego?

It was after dinner, and Penny was propped up on one side of the couch while Leonard sat on the other. He was pumicing her swollen feet on a towel on his lap. It was a tender act, and tenderness had been creeping back into their relationship lately. It was the kind of intimacy that Penny had been missing before, but now that it was back, it made her feel like everything was right. She wasn't sure how the whole naming thing had gotten so out of control, but she and Leonard had somehow managed to fight their way back. She placed a hand over her belly; they had a lot worth fighting for.

"Did you see Sheldon today?" Leonard asked.

She shook her head. "Why?"

"I don't know. He left work early today and was acting really... he was pretty upset."

"Weird. Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't seen any of the family across the hall today. Not even the kids. Of course, I spent the whole day sorting baby clothes, bottles and pacifiers while blasting Maroon 5, so, I easily could have missed them."

"Maroon 5?" Leonard said. "I thought we talked about the study on the correlation between classical music and fetal intelligence."

"We did. Talk about it," Penny said. "It was a nice talk." He shook his head. "Well, I listened to some Queen, too. That has to count for something."

"It does," Leonard conceded with a smile.

"Good," she said, then started pointing. "Don't forget the pinky toe."

"Anyway," Leonard began again, redoubling his efforts on the callus on her right foot, "Sheldon will probably tell me when he wants to," he said, then shrugged. "It's probably none of our business, anyway."

Penny leaned back, closing her eyes and relaxing, when she suddenly shot back up.

"Oooh, oooh, oooh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't tell you—," she began, but was interrupted by a coughing fit.

Leonard glanced up at her, a bit alarmed. "You okay?"

She nodded and took a sip of water, trying to catch her breath. "Yeah," she rasped.

"So, you didn't tell me what?" he asked.
"I didn't tell you." She took a breath. "My mom called me. This morning."

He stopped completely and looked up at her in shock. "She did?"

She nodded. "She did."

"What did she say?"

"Not a lot. Something about the dog. She asked about the baby. The conversation was, like, five minutes long. But it was… I know this is going to sound corny, but it was really nice to hear her voice. To think she would just call me, just because."

Leonard smiled brightly. "I'm happy for you."

Penny nodded. She took another sip from her water, then sat watching Leonard for a while. "You know," she said after long last, "we still haven't picked out a name."

He winced, clearly dreading the topic. "I know," he groaned.

They both sat in silence, probably both hoping for the same thing: that the perfect name would fall out of the sky.

"Well, Sheldon and Amy named the twins after people they admire," Leonard said. "Maybe we could do that."

She shrugged. "Um, okay, I guess."

"Who's someone you admire?" he asked.

Penny thought a long time. "Beyoncé," she finally said. "How do you have a baby and still come out on the other side that bootylicious?"

"Yeah, um, well, she is pretty amazing," Leonard stammered, trying to be diplomatic. "But you know we can't name our daughter Beyoncé, right?"

"Yeah," Penny sighed, looking longingly off into the distance. "I know." She sat back, then suddenly sat up. "How about Hope?"

"Hope?"

"Yeah, Hope," she said, nodding. "This baby for me means a future full of love, and excitement and… hope."

"Hope," Leonard said, warming to the idea. "I actually do like it."

Penny's face brightened. "You do?"

"Yeah. But it's not someone you admire."

Penny shrugged. "Does it matter?"

He shook his head. "Not really, no."

"Who's someone you admire?" she asked.

Leonard looked up, staring Penny in the face. "You," he said without hesitation.
She turned away blushing. "You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not," he said. "I love you, Penny, but I respect you so much. You haven't had an easy go of things but you always pull yourself up by the bootstraps and face life head on. No pity parties for you. If our daughter turns out to be like that, I'll be the proudest father in the world."

She covered her face with both hands, a little embarrassed, but deeply touched. She leaned over and they shared a kiss. "I don't know if I want a daughter with my name, though. Won't everyone think I'm some kind of egomaniac?"

Leonard thought a minute. "Well, how about Penelope? It's close, but still different."

Penny chuckled to herself, then bit her bottom lip, letting the idea sink in. "I think we did it, Leonard," she said.

"Do we have a name?" he asked.

"I think we do," she said. "Penelope Hope Hofstadter."

Leonard repeated it to himself. "Penelope Hope Hofstadter." He smiled. "That definitely has a ring to it."

"It grows on you, doesn't it?"

Leonard agreed, nodding.

Penny picked up her cell. "I've got to tweet this," she said. Leonard stopped her.

"Don't tell anyone yet."

"Why not? You don't want to change it already do you?"

"No, no no," he insisted. "But we should sleep on it, first. Let it sit our mouths overnight. Then we can tell everybody."

"Fine," she said, slowly putting her phone down.

Then there was a burping sound and a foul odor permeated the apartment.

"What the hell is that stench?" Penny said.

"I think it's the trash. I cleaned out the fridge, and there were some ripe things in there. He lowered her feet to the floor and leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm going to go take out the trash. I'll be back in a flash," he said. Penny watched as he grabbed the trash bag and left.

It took her about two seconds to figure out that there was no way she could keep in such exciting news overnight. She had to tell somebody. She had to tell Amy. Penny crept over to the peephole and, when Leonard was out of sight, she went and slipped on some flip-flops then opened the door.

"Hello, Penny."

Penny could barely believe her eyes.

"Beverly?"
After parting with his awful-smelling cargo, Leonard made his way back up the stairs, and thought about his sweet tooth. Ice cream was a no-no, smoothies weren't sweet enough, Penny was skittish about eating too much and never being able to lose the baby fat, so s'mores were probably not a good idea either.

"Penny, what about some cupcakes from down the street?" he said as he walked through the door.

Beverly looked at him from where she was perched on the couch. "That sounds delightful," she said, "granted you don't choose one that contains food dye Yellow #5 in it, which is known to cause birth defects and behavioral issues in children."

Leonard looked at Penny, who was seated behind Beverly, and she flashed back a look of terror.

"Mom," Leonard said, gob-smacked. "What are you doing here?"

"Surely, Leonard, despite your flawed eyesight, with your glasses you can see what I'm doing," she replied. "I'm sitting on the couch with your wife while talking to you."

"I don't mean 'what,' exactly; I just wanted to know… Honestly, he wanted to know who, what, when, where, why and how. "What made you come… unannounced?"

"Well, I realized that given my extensive understanding of children, coupled with your relative absence of knowledge on the topic, my presence and guidance might be of some use to you. This birth is not something you should leave to chance."

"Right," Leonard said, facetiously. "Always thinking about others."

"I try, dear," she said. "Here." She rather nonchalantly held out a gift-wrapped box.

"Awww. Thank you, Beverly," Penny said, taking the parcel from her mother-in-law's hand. She unwrapped it. The box contained a small, lavender, frilly, ruffled dress for a baby. "It's so pretty," Penny chirped, holding it up and admiring it.

"It really is," Leonard agreed.

Penny plucked the card from the box, and read aloud. "With love, from Grandmommy." Penny smiled brightly. "Awww. Thanks, Beverly."

"You are welcome," she said, distractedly.

"Or should I say grandmommy?" Penny said.

"You should not. Beverly will suffice. And, while I certainly understand why you might find the gift aesthetically pleasing, considering that neither of you are churchgoers nor regularly participate in any activity that would require a formally dressed infant, the gesture ultimately shows a lack of insight and is, if I'm being completely honest, a trite one."

"If it's so trite, why did you buy it?" Leonard asked.

"I didn't," Beverly said, rising. "Shelby did."

"Who's Shelby?" Penny asked.

"My personal assistant. She's virtually useless when left to her own devices. " Beverly stood walked towards the bathroom. "Leonard, you do recall how I take my tea, don't you?"
"As if I could ever forget," Leonard muttered.

"Great," she said. "Once I’ve returned from emptying my bladder—a function I understandably could not perform on the plane—I would like a cup of oolong tea," she said.

Leonard wilted inside.

Sheldon and Amy were seated on the bed, cross-legged and facing each other. Sheldon's shocking news flooded the air like napalm gas even hours later. They sat talking about Lise-Marie's accusations, circling the horrific details until it would be emotionally safe to come in for a landing.

"This is unconscionable," Amy said, distraught but newly energized. "I will not stand idly by and watch as she methodically robs us of our entire lives."

Sheldon, however, was utterly demoralized. "You should have seen the looks around the room. From Gablehauser to Mrs. Simon to Lise-Marie's very counsel, in their minds I was all but tried and convicted."

"But you are neither tried nor convicted," Amy said, "and we will fight this. Sheldon, this time she has simply gone too far."

On the heels of the statement, there was a knock on the front door. Amy sighed heavily, closing her eyes. There was another knock, even louder and more urgent. She opened her eyes and took a parting look at Sheldon, who was looking down at the mattress. She felt the urge to reach for his hand that was resting on the bed, but then didn't. She rose, and then went out to the living room to answer the door. It was Penny.

"I have to talk to you," Penny said. Amy paused a beat, then let her in.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

A dry cleaners is not some establishment where you simply bring your garments, drop them off and return days later to collect clean clothes. Duh.

Penny walked through the front door of Amy and Sheldon's apartment and didn't see anyone. Didn't even hear a peep.

"Is Sheldon here?" she asked.

Amy nodded. "He's in the bedroom."

"Good," Penny said. She took Amy's hand and pulled her to the kitchen, huddling with her in front of the refrigerator. Her original plan of telling Amy about the baby's name was a distant memory, supplanted by the horror show happening across the hall. "My mother-in-law is here," she said.

"Oh," Amy said. "So she came after all. That's good."

"That is not good, Amy," she said. "That is horrible. Firstly, she gave us no warning, so I didn't have a chance to put her head-shrinking books back on the coffee table. Plus, she's condescending, critical and turns Leonard into a whiny ball of nerves."

"Oh," Amy said, devoid of any emotion.

It was then that she noticed that Amy was not herself, and Penny was poised to comment on it, when in the next moment, there was another knock on the door. Amy moved to get it, but Penny stopped her.

"It's Leonard," she whispered. "Don't open it."

Amy furrowed her brow. "I believe he knows we're in here."

"Yeah, but he still can't get in."

The plan seemed shortsighted, and Amy almost told Penny so, when suddenly Sheldon appeared from the back just as there was another knock. He briefly glanced at Amy, then walked to the door to answer it. As predicted, it was Leonard.

His mouth was already open—on the brink of investigating his "name-leaking" suspicions and inquiring of Penny why she had snuck out during an optimal moment of tea-brewing and bladder emptying—but the sight of Sheldon reset his mind. In fact, seeing him standing there almost startled him.

"Sheldon," he said flatly.

"Surely you realize that I live here," Sheldon said.

"Of course, I just…" he stopped. Then he had a thought. "Can I speak to you?" he asked.
"You are already speaking to me," Sheldon said.

"I mean, like, in the hallway," Leonard specified.

Sheldon sighed, and then exited, pulling the door behind him.

"My mother is here," Leonard said.

"In a day of sorrow, at last, a bit of good news," Sheldon said.

"That is not good news, Sheldon," Leonard countered. "That is awful news."

"But I thought you wanted her to come."

"I did. But it was a phase, a phase that has passed."

"Well, I'm confused," Sheldon said, wearily.

"First," Leonard began, "she didn't give me any warning, and so I didn't get a chance to hide all the pink toys I bought that will 'indoctrinate my daughter into antiquated feminine gender roles.' Besides, she's condescending, critical and turns Penny into a sobbing, insecure mess."

"How is Penny usually?" Sheldon asked. Despite the barb, Sheldon's subdued delivery caught Leonard's attention.

"Are you okay?" Leonard asked.

"I am well," Sheldon said, completely unconvincingly.

"This doesn't have anything to do with why I got assigned to stand in for you on Wei Gong's defense committee, does it?"

Sheldon didn't answer at first. "Possibly," he finally said.

Meanwhile, Penny was conducting an investigation of her own.

"Is something wrong, Amy?" she asked.

Amy paused a moment before answering. She seemed reluctant to answer. "We weren't going to say anything," she said.

"Who's 'we'?" Penny said. "What weren't you going to say?"

Amy thought a long while before answering. "It's Sheldon's job," she said. "He's on administrative leave."

"Administrative leave!" Leonard gasped, shocked at the news Sheldon had just told him. "Sheldon, how in the hell did you get on administrative leave? Don't they usually give that to people who, like, did something that borders on the criminal? What did you do? Follow Seibert to the men's room one too many times?"

"If that was an attempt at humor," Sheldon said, "it was quite the opposite. Besides, I am completely innocent."

"Innocent of what?" Leonard asked.
"HARRASSMENT!" Penny cried. With every word out of Amy's mouth, the story got more preposterous. She almost started laughing, but then she caught the downhearted and weary look in Amy's eyes, and tried her best to swallow it down. "Like, who did he harr—" she started, but was jolted by an epiphany. "Don't tell me it was…"

"It's Lise-Marie, isn't it?" Leonard asked, already knowing full well what the answer was. Sheldon's silence only confirmed his suspicions.

"THAT BITCH!" Penny screamed. "I knew she was a snake from the first moment I… well I've never laid eyes on her, but I'm just that good, Amy."

Leonard joined Penny on her victory lap from afar. "I told you leave her alone, Sheldon."

"I am aware of that, Leonard," Sheldon said with some exasperation. "Feel free to gloat, as I'm sure you will."

"I'm not gloating," Leonard said, sincerely. "This situation is really messed up. I know this administrative leave is coming at a bad time." He sighed, compassionately. "So what are you going to do?"

His wife was inside wondering the same thing.

"I don't know," Amy answered, despondent.

"You don't know?" Penny repeated. "Don't tell me you're just going to lie down and give up."

"Of course not," Amy said, and then looked at her, a tacit plea in her eye. "But I don't know what to do."

"You're going to march down to that heifer's house and give her the what for, that's what. When you are done with her, she's going to drop the charges so fast her head is going to spin."

"I don't know, Penny. I don't have that raw passion and feline intimidation that you have."

"That's why you're taking me with you." She grabbed Amy's hand and marched to the door.

"Where are you taking me?" Amy said.

"To her house."

"Now?"

"Yep. Bitches move fast. We have to stay a step ahead of her."

Outside the door, Leonard was concocting a plan of his own.

"You have to convince her to drop the suit in a calm, rational, civil fashion."

"And just how should I do that, Leonard?" Sheldon asked. "If I go anywhere near her, that's only going to strengthen her case against me."

"That's why you're taking me with you," Leonard said. "You know I've always had a knack for being persuasive with the lady folk."

"Your circuitous courtship with Penny would suggest otherwise," Sheldon said.

"Right now?!" Sheldon said.

"Of course. Are you going to wait until you get fired completely?" He pushed past Sheldon and put his hand to the doorknob when it suddenly opened. He was staring at Penny. "Hey," he said. "We were just about to go somewhere."

"Go somewhere?" Penny repeated. "Where?"

"To, to, to," Leonard stammered. "To take care of something at work."

Penny squinted, incredulous. "Well, we were just about to go somewhere."

"You two?" Leonard said. "Where were you two going?"

"We are going," Penny corrected. "We have to do something that has to do with female issues."

"Oh, c'mon," Leonard said. "That's not fair. As a man I'm not even allowed to ask what that means."

"Sucks to be you," Penny said, and walked past him with Amy in hand.

"What we are doing is really important, Penny," Leonard insisted. He looked at Sheldon. "Right?"

Sheldon reflected a moment. "Indeed it is."

"There," Leonard said. "See, we trump."

"No, we trump. I'm a pregnant lady. That's gives me a universal pass to get my way. Especially when it's female related."

Amy nodded. "I would have to concur with that statement."

"Fine," Leonard said, "We'll both go."

Sheldon and Amy raised their hands in unison. Amy spoke first.

"If we both go, who's going to keep the twins?"

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"We really appreciate this Beverly," Amy said.

"Oh, think nothing of it. I am currently working on a study on literacy in small children. I welcome the opportunity to spend time with young ones of Aditi and Robert's mental keenness. I understand that Robert may be a genius. I welcome new experiences."

"Hello, Mother, I'm right here," Leonard said. "If you recall, my IQ is 173, a fact that both qualifies me as a genius, and means that the first 16 years I spent at home—because, mind you, I went to college early—were years that you spent living with a person of exceptional intelligence."

Beverly sighed deeply. "Leonard. I've scarcely been here an hour and your cloying pleas for approval and affirmation have already begun. I hope this will not characterize my visit, although your jealousy of a four-year-old would suggest otherwise."

Smoke was practically coming from Leonard's ears.
Robert pulled on Amy's skirt. "I want to go with you," he said.

She crouched down. "Daddy and I won't be gone long," she said. "This lady is a neuroscientist, kind of like Mommy."

"Does she tell stories about talking dendrites like you do?"

Amy looked up at Beverly, who was looking disapprovingly at the back of her hands.

"The Asians, while possessing an enviable work ethic and having made a sizable contribution to the field of science," Beverly said, "have simply ruined the manicure industry."

Amy turned back to Robert. "I don't believe so. But she does like word games." She hoped.

"Okay," Robert said, somewhat soothed.

"Amy, let's go," Penny said impatiently, and bolted for the door. Amy walked out after her.

Leonard gathered himself. "I guess we should go, too," he said, and followed the women out.

Sheldon stared at the open door, and then looked back at Beverly.

"Wish me well," he said.

"It would make no difference on the outcome if I didn't."

"Indeed you're right," Sheldon said. "The circumstances have compromised my rationality."

Leonard stuck his head back through the door. "Are you coming or not?"

"Bye, Beverly," Sheldon said and left.

Beverly looked down at the twins, who were seated on the couch. They were staring at her with looks of apprehension.

Robert whispered something in Aditi's ear.

"We aren't going to eat any Brussels' sprouts," she said.

Beverly observed them with curiosity. "The girl appears to be the extravert of the two, typifying the feminine propensity towards oral communication, while the male has assumed the role of the 'alpha,' establishing the communal guidelines and social norms of their fraternal microcosm. While one would be inclined to attribute the founding of these roles along lines of gender, I'm inclined to believe there is a symphony of variables that have ushered them into these positions. Likely suspects would include—but are likely not limited to—their respective intellectual propensities, as well as environmental factors, such as their relationships with their parents, diet, and behavior reinforcement methods."

Neither twin moved.

"We aren't going to eat any Brussels' sprouts," Aditi repeated.

"Of course you aren't," Beverly said, and walked over to the refrigerator, taking a pointed look at its inventory. She pulled out two popsicles. "Now. You can each have a treat if you agree to participate in a little round of free word association."
Leonard and Sheldon were parked on the street where Lise-Marie lived, but a couple of houses down from her actual address. Leonard opened the driver-side door, ready to hop out, when Sheldon stopped him.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me what you plan on saying to her, again?" Sheldon asked.

"I don't know what exactly," Leonard said. "I prefer to speak spontaneously."

"But you are terrible at extemporaneous speech," Sheldon said. "You are all but reduced to a blubbering ball of incoherence at a drive-thru window."

"Look, Sheldon do you want my help or not?"

Sheldon thought a second. "Well, the situation certainly can't be worsened any. At least not by you blubbering at her door."

Leonard rolled her eyes. "You should know I'm doing this for Amy, not you."

Sheldon face brightened slightly. "A confession that I find endearing."

"Anyway," Leonard said, "I'm going to appeal to Lise-Marie's conscience and inform her that whatever misunderstanding has arisen between the two of you can easily be resolved if you sit in the same room and hash out the details. Surely she can't want a messy, drawn-out proceeding anymore than you do."

"I think you underestimate her malice," Sheldon said. "In the realm of comics, she's more Dark Phoenix than Harley Quinn." Leonard took exception with this assertion. "I don't know. Harley is recklessly violent and is more deceptively cunning."

Sheldon shook his head. "I maintain that Dark Phoenix is one of the most powerful supervillians to enter the realm of comic storytelling, regardless of gender."

"A common assertion that I've always taken issue with. " Leonard began. "Under the par—" He paused when he saw Lise-Marie's front door open. She stuck her head out, taking a sweeping look around the neighborhood, and then shut the door again. "Gotta go," he said, and jumped from the car.

Penny and Amy were parked on the street where Lise-Marie lived, but a couple of houses down. Penny was staring at Lise-Marie's house through a pair of binoculars. Amy watched her with some reservation.

"I am disinclined to have you get out of the car, Penny," Amy said. "The late hour means we only have another half hour of daylight, meaning our stake-out has an expiration date that is fast approaching. Additionally, considering your advanced stage of pregnancy and this woman's amorality, I can only imagine scenarios that end in tragedy."

"Nonsense," Penny said. "I'm going to be the perfect little helpless pregnant woman until she hits the curb. That's when you come in."

"And what am I supposed to say?"

"Look, Amy," she said, lowering her binoculars. "We've been over this. Keep it loose, but strike quickly, strike forcefully, and send her sniveling back to her whore cave. Just remember, you have one objective and one objective only: to show her who's the head bitch in charge."
"And that bitch would be me?"

"Of course," she replied, resuming her long-distance surveillance.

"So being a bitch is good thing now?"

Penny sighed. "Don't overthink it, sweetie. You are the good guy and she is—" Just then, she spotted a little, bespectacled man walking towards the house. "Wait one second," she said, tossing Amy the binoculars, and hopped out.

Leonard walked up to the front porch and rang the doorbell. He was surprised when the door swung open a second later.

"Dr. Hofstadter," Lise-Marie said, startled. "I was expecting someone else."

"Um, yeah, I… um," he turned around, looking for Sheldon, but the car was barely visible from this vantage point. He turned back to Lise-Marie and clasped his hands together. "I was just hoping we could talk about this situation with Sheldon."

Lise-Marie leveled a sneer at him. "I see Dr. Cooper sent his most loyal minion to make it all better," she said. "I'm afraid it won't be that simple."

"This is one big misunderstanding that can be cleared up with one honest and open conversation."

"I am sure my lawyer would love to have that conversation with him. Goodbye, Dr. Hofstadter," she said and moved to shut the door. Leonard stuck his hand in the door, holding it open.

"I'm not done," he said.

"Excuse me," she said, her tone turning sharp. "I strongly suggest that you step away from my door."

Leonard wasn't deterred. "Sheldon didn't harass you and you know it," he said. "If you think the truth isn't going to come out, you're in for a rude awakening."

"Am I?" she said.

"You should do the right thing and tell the truth while you can."

They stood locked in a tense look: Leonard determined, Lise-Marie upset. She suddenly swung the door wide open, almost throwing Leonard off balance.

"You have five seconds to get off of my porch or I'm calling the police," she said. "You will soon see that I am not bluffing. Just ask Sheldon." Then she slammed the door.

Leonard backed away before turning around and making his way down the walk. He was almost at the gate when he felt someone snatch his hoodie and pull him behind a nearby bush.

"Penny?" he asked, in disbelief.

"What are you doing here?" Penny whispered.

"I'm here to talk to Lise-Marie. What are you doing here?" he whispered back.

"I'm here to… talk to her, too."
"What happened to you taking care of female issues?"

"The same thing that happened to you dealing with something at 'work.'"

"This is work related," Leonard insisted.

"And this is female related," Penny countered.

"Shouldn't Amy be doing this?" Leonard said. "She hasn't been accused of harassment."

"She is 'doing this.' I'm just here as the lure."

"Penny," Leonard said, his voice scolding. "You're out of your mind. There's no way a woman in your condition should be battling with a woman like her."

"Watch me," Penny said, and took off for the front door.

"PENNY!" he called after her, half yelling, half whispering. He stayed crouching behind the bush.

Penny ignored the doorbell, and knocked three times. Once again the door flew open. Once again Lise-Marie was shocked.

"I should really start using my peephole," she muttered to herself.

"Hello," Penny said, extending her hand. "I'm… Rhiannon."

Lise-Marie looked at the hand condescendingly. "And how might I help you… Rhiannon?"

"You won't believe this," Penny said, her voice cheery and bright. She twirled her hair a little. "But my car was making a weird noise and I got out seeing if my tire was flat. Thank God, it wasn't, but while getting out I managed to knock some important things out my purse: my medicine, checkbook… you know?" she said, gesturing with her hand.

Lise-Marie was unmoved. "I am sorry, but where do I come in?"

"Ah, yes." Penny spread both hands across her belly. "With this ten-ton load I'm carrying, I can't bend over to pick them up. Would you be able to help me?"

Lise-Marie took a look down the street again, as if she were anticipating something. "Fine," she conceded. "But this must be quick." She pulled the door behind her and followed Penny to the street. Leonard watching the scene unfold from his hiding place, and ducked even lower as the women drew closer.

"So where is that accent from?" Penny asked, smiling.

Lise-Marie stiffened as she answered. "France."

Liar, Penny thought. "Wow, France," she said. "I've always wanted to go to Paris. Seems magical with the Eiffel—"

"You look familiar," Lise-Marie said suddenly.

"I can't imagine why," Penny said, and she really couldn't. They'd never even batted an eyelash at each other before. "Well you don't look familiar. I don't think we've ever met."

Lise-Marie didn't reply. "Where is your car again?"
Penny pointed a few houses down.

"Why didn't you ask one of the closer neighbors?" she asked, not sounding very neighborly.

"Well, your home seemed more inviting," Penny said.

Lise-Marie looked at her suspiciously. In short order they reached the car. There was nothing on the ground.

"Where are your belongings?" Lise-Marie asked.

"Belongings? Right, belongings," Penny said, while glaring at Amy through the window. Lise-Marie caught her looking, and followed her eyes. "What is this?" she said.

Amy got out of the car. "I need to talk to you," she growled. "Once again."

Lise-Marie's head snapped to Penny. "That's who you are. You're Leonard Hofstadter's girlfriend. I recognize you from the picture in his lab."

"I'm his wife, you little homewrecker," Penny snapped back, "and if you so much as—"

"PENNY!" Amy called. Penny bit her tongue, but glared at Lise-Marie. Amy drew closer to the two women. "I didn't come here to attack you," she said.

"Yes, you did," Penny whispered loudly. "You absolutely did."

"I came here to make you understand the damage you are causing in the life of our family with your vicious lies."

"Oh, please, Amy," Lise-Marie scoffed. "Sheldon is suffering the consequences of his own error."

"You and I both know that he would sooner eat his hat than harass anyone."

"Really?" Lise-Marie said, drawing closer. "Because you didn't seem to be so confident in his character last Saturday when you interrupted my meal."

Amy could feel herself growing hot. "I wasn't worried about him, Lise-Marie; I was worried about you."

Lise-Marie sneered at her. "As you should be." She turned and walked off. Amy followed briskly and jumped in front of her, blocking her path. "Step away from me, Amy," she said.

"My family should not have to suffer because you're a deficient scientist."

Lise-Marie gasped. "How dare you?" she said.

"How. Dare. You?" Penny yelled, drawing closer.

"Drop the charges," Amy demanded.

"Never," Lise-Marie shot back.

"You won't win."

"I already have," she said arrogantly. "So I suggest you and your little friend get back in your car—"
"Who are you calling 'little'?'" Penny asked.

Lise-Marie continued, "…and then get your defense ready."

"Oh, I will," Amy said. "With the territorial aggression of a thousand gibbons. Their endangered species status notwithstanding."

Lise-Marie brushed past her and marched back to the house.

"You should be so glad I'm pregnant right now," Penny yelled after her.

When Lise-Marie closed the door, Leonard collapsed, crawling from behind the bush, brushing off dirt, leaves and stray bugs. He jogged over to where the women were standing.

"Did she back down?" he asked.

"Crazy never backs down," Penny said. "She's just going to have to get her ass kicked."

"Despite her defiance," Amy said, "I found the overall experience rather invigorating. It served to bring my foe into focus and crystallize the objective of the battle set before me."

Leonard raised an eyebrow. "Did you all confront Lise-Marie or watch *Star Wars*?"

"You get pumped for battle your way, we get pumped for battle our way," Penny said. "Meet you back at the apartment?"

"Yeah," he sighed and walked off. "May the Force be with you."

When Sheldon and Amy got back to the apartment, they found the children seated at the kitchen table with pencils in hand, playing Boggle while Beverly stood several paces off, talking into the phone.

"Shelby, Shelby, Shelby," she intoned. "A dry cleaners is not some establishment where you simply bring your garments, drop them off and return days later to collect clean clothes. You must provide specific care instructions and details on each article of clothing to ensure that they are operating meticulously. Otherwise, how will you know if they've cleaned the garments at all?"

"I couldn't agree more," Sheldon said, placing his keys in the bowl.

"Of course you must return them and have them cleaned again, and this time, I beg of you, please be much more proactive about the buttons." She hung up. "You all have arrived back at the same time," she said. "How very curious."

"Indeed," Sheldon said. "It seems our missions overlapped."

"Indicating that you all have a shared objective that you prefer to accomplish along gender lines and in a clandestine fashion. Be wary, ladies: when stealth and sexual boundaries cross, it is typically females who get the proverbial 'short end of the stick.' Unless that stick is a phallus, in which case, size would be a matter of length and girth."

Amy walked over to the children. "Did you behave yourselves while we were gone?"

Both children nodded.

"Indeed they did," Beverly concurred. "They showed remarkable aptitude in the areas of literacy,
image association, abstract critical thinking, and Boggle-playing."

"Yeah," Penny said, "they're great Bogglers, alright. They've beaten me plenty of times."

"Well, they never bested me, of course," Beverly said. "Although they made a valiant effort. The girl in particular shows an aptitude for language."

"We know," Amy said.

"The boy, however, made a good showing as well. He found the word GOTHAM in a most convoluted fashion. Of course, the term is a proper noun, but I was so bewitched, I allowed the transgression to pass." She pulled her lips taut in something that vaguely resembled a smile. Just barely. "I am not above the charms of the boy and girl."

"The 'boy and girl' have names, Mother," Leonard said.

"I'm sure they do, but I prefer not to fraternize with my test subjects." She lifted her purse from the couch. "I'll be going," she said.

"Just let yourself back in. The linen is in the closet to the right of the bathroom."

"Oh, was I not clear? I'll be staying at the local Marriot," she said.

"Really? A hotel?"

"Your couch is not a suitable lodging facility," she said, and then left.

Amy motioned for the children to rise. "Time for bed," she said. "Go hug everyone good night."

"But we didn't finish the game," Aditi whined.

"We'll leave it out and you may finish it tomorrow," she said. The children rose and so did Sheldon, he moved over to where Amy stood.

"I believe I can put them to bed alone," she said, a bit sternly. Sheldon said nothing, but his face was sullen. She touched his arm. "Maybe you can sort through the charges."

He nodded once then walked off a pace, when he suddenly had a thought. He approached Robert. "So, Gotham, huh?"

Robert nodded proudly. "It was all twisty turny, too."

Sheldon placed a hand on his son's head, rustling his hair a little. "Well done."

"Let's start on those hugs, shall we?" Amy announced over the group.

Sheldon dropped down and took his son in his arms. After the day he'd had, the moment felt even more amazing than usual. He'd missed a lot of bedtimes lately—he had some catching up to do. "Sleep well, Robert," he whispered.

"I will, Dad," Robert whispered back.

Once every hug, kiss, "goodnight," and "I didn't get to say goodnight to the baby" had been done with, Amy disappeared with the twins into their room.

"Now," Penny said, "let's get to work."
The doorbell rung three times in quick succession and, finally peering through the peephole, Lise-Marie saw her long-awaited guest standing there. *Better late than never*, she thought.

"Hello, Attorney Richards," she said.

"Dr Zurbriggen," he said with a nod. "May I come in?"

"Of course," she said, opening the door widely. "Thank you for coming."

"It was no problem at all," he said, taking off his suit jacket. She took it from his hand and hung it on a hat tree by the door. "Before we get started," he said, "you should know that this would usually be billable hours, but I’m willing to make this evening's session *pro bono*.

She nodded, smiling. "Well, that is welcomed news. Thank you."

"No need to thank me," he said. He took a casual look around her home. "So, shall we get started?"

By the time Amy had returned a half hour later, Sheldon, Leonard and Penny were thoroughly immersed in copies, print-outs, theories (some bordering on the conspiratorial), and—most importantly—a defense.

"At this point, it is mandatory that we get the surveillance footage of you both leaving and entering her home on Saturday," Leonard said.

"As well as a transcript of the initial meeting in Human Resources for a formal list of her so-called evidence against me," Sheldon added.

Amy sat down between Sheldon, who was seated in his spot, and Leonard, who was sitting to her right. Penny sat in the armchair.

"There's just something that's not adding up," Penny said.

Sheldon looked up, uneasy. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, sure, she made some comments to you at the party, then Amy confronted her on her behavior, then you went to go straighten it out, but… there's just something fishy. There's a element to the story that is just not adding up. I mean, I honestly don't know why Human Resources is even giving this woman the time of day." She looked up from the stack on her lap. "Is there anything missing in all this paper?" she asked.

In fact, there was. The most damning evidence and smoking gun—the email in which Sheldon had proposed marriage—had been missing ever since Sheldon had surreptitiously removed it from his folder and tucked it under the couch before they had even got started. He glanced covertly at Amy, and she caught his gaze. She suddenly stood.

"Would anyone like anything to drink?" she asked, walking to the kitchen.

"I'll take a beer, if you have one," Leonard said. After a moment of silence he looked up. "And of course you don't."

"Milk, Kool-Aid, orange juice and water are your options. Pedialyte is also available."

"I'll take the juice, thank you," Leonard said.
"I'll have the same," Sheldon said.

"And you, Penny?" Amy asked.

"Just water," she answered, "but let me help you."

"That won't be necessary," Amy insisted, but Penny was soon at her side anyway.

"You know I'm just trying to help you guys, right?" she said softly.

"Yes," Amy said without looking up.

"It's just..." she paused, looking back at the boys. They were engrossed in conversation. She spoke softly. "I saw your eyes that night, Amy. I never mentioned it to Leonard, but I know something was wrong, and—"

"So you think he is guilty?" Amy asked defensively.

"Of course not. Absolutely not," Penny assured her.

"Then that is all that matters," Amy said sharply.

Penny nodded. "You're absolutely right," she said, then turned to join the boys again in the living room. Amy reached out to her, and she paused.

"I'm sorry," Amy said. "It's only—"

"It's okay," Penny said. "Forget I said anything."

Lise-Marie lay in bed, flat on her back with her hands crossed against her chest and feeling utterly tranquil. As of late, her life had been synonymous with a lot of work and worry, so this was a welcomed reprieve. She'd originally had no intentions of turning her relationship with Michael into a carnal one, but at some point, turning down his advances stopped making sense—especially since her nights ran long and lonely. Ultimately, Michael had proven to be orally gifted outside of the courtroom as well.

Her post-coital serenity aside, his current behavior was harshing her buzz. She wanted to keep this thing casual, but his desire to cuddle after sex might threaten that; there were only so many ways she could roll out of a hug or slip her hand from underneath his arm. The fact was, what they were doing had "conflict-of-interest" written all over it. Besides, there was always that chance that she could be called out of the country any day. She'd begun to think that taking Sheldon's job was a pyrrhic victory: more work with no more job security. Of course, marriage could fix that too, or at least keep her in the States, but somehow she had a feeling that Michael would be more clingy than Sheldon. He might want her to talk to him, or eat with him, or... move in.

He placed another kiss on her bare shoulder. "You're beautiful," he said.

She didn't open her eyes. "I know," she said, smiling.

"No wonder Dr. Cooper was so into you," he said.

She squirmed a little. "No wonder."

His face lit up. "Maybe we could have breakfast in the morning. Have you been to the Dandelion's yet?"
She turned to him, deliberately trying to not look regretful. "I have work in the morning."

He nodded. "Right." He sighed, though still not quite upset. She was oddly relieved. "I got a call from Seibert earlier."

"Really?" she said, turning on her side and facing him. She tucked her hands under her head. "Did he require assistance in getting his condom off?"

"You know, he mentioned that."

She laughed. "Wicked, wicked," she said, tapping his nose.

"Actually, I'm serious," he said.

"Surely you jest," she said, incredulous.

"I mean, not the condom part specifically, but he asked if I'd heard where he was over the weekend."

"And your answer?"

"I told him that I knew he was in San Diego, but not much else."

Her faced stiffened. "You should not have said that."

"Yeah, I figured that out—after the fact." He fidgeted with his hands a bit then looked back at her quizzically. "Why not?"

"Because, he told me that in confidence after the party. However, I confess, I get a bit loose-lipped when I'm staring into beautiful, brown eyes." She brought her lips to his and he closed the gap after a moment of hesitation. In the end, it was one of their weaker kisses.

He looked at her afterwards a bit too pensively for her liking.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You first hired me inquiring about digital security laws in the US, then I was suddenly thrust into this harassment case. Is there something I should know?"

"Of course not," she said, returning her head to the pillow and closing her eyes. "Besides, you know you should never reveal too much to your attorney." She smiled coyly, "I've already revealed too much."

Michael didn't acknowledge the flirtatious statement. He just sat staring at her, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Lise-Marie reached up, pulling him back to the bed. "Less talking, less thinking and more," she stretched out her arms, letting out a pleasurable moan. "More resting, okay?"

He lay down, but wasn't resting. "I hope I'm not being put in a compromising position."

"Of course not," she assured him. "There's no such thing. You're protected by attorney-client privilege. All my secrets are legally safe between us." Then she regretted using the word "secrets." She was not in the proper state of mind to be having this conversation.

"That's mostly true," he said, followed by a pregnant pause, "but according to the case Clark v.
United States, ’a client who consults an attorney for advice that will serve him in the commission of a fraud will have no help from the law. He must let the truth be told.’"

Lise-Marie sat up in bed, thoroughly rattled. "What are you saying?"

Michael sat up a little, too, clearly startled by her response. "Nothing, baby. Nothing." He brushed her hair with his hand. "Calm down."

"Michael," she said, her voice severe, "You are not going to talk to the authorities are you?"

"Of course not," he said. "I just have a career to protect. You understand that. We all do."

She looked away. "Why is everyone suddenly so interested in their careers more than me?!” she yelled, breathing hard.

"That's ridiculous," he said, reaching for her hand. "You know I care about you."

She snatched her hand away. "Then promise me you won't say a word about any of this to anyone else."

Michael paused a moment. "Promise me you didn't use our conversation to commit a crime."

"The fact you would even suggest such a thing," she turned her face away, her bottom lip trembling, "breaks my heart."

"Oh, sweetie," he said, panicked. "I just had some questions, that's all. I would never—"

"GET OUT, MICHAEL!" she yelled, pulling the cover around herself.

"Look, Lise-Marie, just—"

"GET THE HELL OUT, NOW!" she said, pointing at the door. He alighted from the bed, nude. She grabbed his boxers from under the covers and threw them at him. He dressed hurriedly. He finally spoke as he struggled to pull up his pants.

"So I guess I'm fired as your attorney," he said.

"Of course not," she said, her voice returned to its previous volume. "You know too much."

He shook his head and walked out.

Amy opened one eye, then another, groggily fighting to wake up. Across from her in bed was Sheldon.

"Good morning," he said.

This time last week, she would have given anything in the world to wake up to Sheldon lying there beside her with disheveled hair, morning stubble and those blue, sleepy, bedroom eyes. At the moment, however, he just looked like a very long day.

"Good morning, Sheldon," she said, and rose to get started.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Because a toy broom makes a pretty good light saber.

Dr. Seibert was in his office when he heard his phone buzz. It was his secretary.
"Yes, Mrs. Johnson?" he asked.
"There is an Attorney Richards here to speak with you. Are you available to receive him?"

*Attorney Richards, Attorney Richards*, Seibert chanted to himself. The name sounded familiar. Then he remembered. "Send him back, Mrs. Johnson. Thank you."

A moment later Lise-Marie's attorney was standing in his doorway. Seibert rose to greet him.

"What brings you to my office?" Seibert asked.

"I," he paused, clearly wrestling with himself. "I am in a situation that pits my loyalties to my client against my loyalties to the legal system and therefore puts me in an ethical conundrum."

Seibert pulled the man inside the office and shut the door. "What are we talking about here?"

Richards sighed to himself. "I have some information on Dr. Zurbriggen that I believe I am legally required to reveal to the authorities. However, before doing so, I wanted to come to you first."

"Of course, of course," Seibert goaded him. "I'll help in anyway I can."

"Good," Michael said. "You should probably look at this."

Amy was sorting through a box of doodads, knickknacks, and gizmos, while making decisions about which items should go to the new house, which should be donated to Goodwill and which were going to the landfill. True to form, Sheldon was presiding over the effort.

"You're throwing out that bib?" he asked.

"Yes. I already said that we were getting rid of anything we haven't touched in three years or more."

"Yes, but that was my favorite of Robert's bibs." He reached down for it and chuckled to himself. "These fools put on my cape backwards. It never gets old."

"Actually, it does," Amy said, taking it back from him. "We have no use for it."

"Perhaps Penny would."

"It's for a boy," Amy said.

"Well, that's no way for a person who endorses gender equality to speak."
"Sheldon, it's been sitting in this box since Robert's last run in with pureed peas. It smells like moth."

Sheldon stuck out his bottom lip. "Very well then. Fare thee well, bib. Thank you for providing months of mealtime humor."

After forty-five minutes of such theatrics, Amy was growing fatigued. She might have normally found his antics amusing, but today she didn't.

She pulled out a stopped clock from the box and placed it in the container of things to keep.

"Really?" Sheldon said. "It's in horrid aesthetic condition and doesn't function."

"My great-aunt gave this to me prior to her death. It carries sentimental value. Plus, I plan to have it restored at some point."

"We could have had the bib restored," Sheldon muttered.

That was it.

"Sheldon, this is a job for one. Perhaps you can find out what the children are up to. They are awfully quiet, and that usually means they have stumbled into mischief."

"As in, I may have to punish them?" Sheldon said.

"If punishment is warranted, yes."

Sheldon squirmed. Uneasily, he made his way to their room. She sighed in relief. Finally, she would be able to work in peace.

The Universe had other plans. The phone rang. She rose to answer it.

After hanging up, she walked to the children's room. Inside, she heard shrieks and some banging noises. She knocked twice and walked in. She found Sheldon holding Robert over his left shoulder, Aditi holding on to his right leg for dear life, and a toy broom in his right hand. All three were laughing heartily. They froze, however, when Amy walked in.

"Sheldon, may I speak to you?" she said.

"You may," he said, walking forward with the whole kit and caboodle like a human jungle gym.

"Alone," she said, and left. A few minutes later he emerged, his clothes and hair thoroughly tousled.

"Yes?" he said.

"That was the bank. They would like to meet with us as soon as possible. I told them we could be there in an hour."

"Did they say what this meeting pertains to?"

Amy looked away, then back at Sheldon. "The house."

Seibert looked at the screen, his head spinning. When he first met with Dr. Lively and Dr. Anderson (the representatives from the Department of Energy and Department of Defense) in
Washington, DC, they had been welcomed bearers of good news and exciting things to come. With each successive teleconference, however, Seibert has begun to dread meeting with them all.

"Surely there's been some mistake," Seibert said.

"There has been absolutely no mistake," Dr. Anderson said, "and we have some reason to believe that you have known about these breaches for quite some time."

"That's patently false," Seibert said. "I found out about them a few short days ago. According to the University's bylaws, I had to confirm my suspicions with our IT department before I said anything."

"Oh spare me," Dr. Lively said, annoyed. "This is bigger than Caltech's Board of Trustees, Seibert. This is a matter of national security."

"Let's not get dramatic," Seibert said.

"Dramatic?" Dr. Anderson repeated, laughing facetiously while turning to Dr. Lively. "Believe as you wish, Dr. Seibert. But the monies for this project have been frozen and the program put on indefinite suspension."

"While it's obvious that action must be taken," Seibert replied, "I'm sure this can be resolved without going to such drastic measures."

"These measures are merciful, Dr. Seibert. And frankly, we've been very disappointed with Caltech's performance throughout the duration of this effort," Dr. Lively said.

Seibert shook his head. "I assure you I am equally appalled at the way this has transpired and I will do everything in my power to conduct a full investigation as to who—"

"I think the FBI can handle it," Dr. Lively said.

"Then I'll be of assistance."

"You can be of assistance by scouring your staff for potential suspects," Dr. Anderson said.

Seibert looked at the paper on his desk that Michael had given him earlier. "Actually," he said, looking back up at the screen. "I have an idea of who's behind this."

Sheldon and Amy looked at each other apprehensively as they sat in front of their loan officer, Rob Dixon. He seemed to be working at an excruciatingly leisurely pace.

"I called you in," he said finally, "because when verifying the financial information for the closing in ten days, it came to my attention, Dr. Cooper, that there has been a change in your income."

Sheldon looked at Amy. "Yes, I am aware."

"When did this change occur?"

"Yesterday," Sheldon answered.

"How unfortunate," the officer said.

Amy spoke up. "You should know I'm about to get a new job. It would come close to doubling our current household income."
"And while I'm certain that's the case, I can't operate based on a future income."

Sheldon was not easily subdued. "We have an impeccable credit rating," he said. "Surely that must count for something."

"While it is certainly a very persuasive factor towards your creditworthiness, your credit history alone is not sufficient for a loan of this size."

"So what does that mean?" Amy asked.

"It means, regrettably, that your current earnings make you ineligible for this loan. We will most likely be unable to proceed with the closing next week. Rest assured, you can still get a loan with us for a more manageable size for a different property."

"But I want this house!" Amy said. The officer squirmed uncomfortably at the outburst. Amy turned to Sheldon, her eyes pleading. "This is just one thing I really want."

The officer struggled for something to say. "If there is a silver lining in this, it's that, as far as I know, the owners have not received any other offers. Maybe you can wait it out, at least until you are more established in your new job. We can try again then."

"The house may be gone by then," Amy said, frustrated.

"What if we put down a bigger down payment?" Sheldon asked.

The loan officer paused, his lips pursed and his head tilted to one side. "Well, we can certainly do the math." He turned towards his computer and began typing away. Amy and Sheldon looked at each other, anxiously awaiting his conclusion. After a moment, he spoke again. "It's a tight, tight call, but with your exemplary credit history and long-term job stability, along with a slight refinancing of the loan, I believe a larger down payment would probably get you in a position to still be able to close on the house. With the approval of both lawyers, of course."

"How much more?" Sheldon asked.

"Almost double."

It was a breathtaking figure, thousands of dollars above the cash they had on hand.

"I see your shock," the officer said, "but it's really the best we can do." His face softened some. "Let's try this. I am obligated to submit the final report to the real estate attorneys, who will probably end the deal outright as it stands now. However, I still have five days before I have to notify them legally. That'll give you a little time to see what resources you may have to secure the higher down payment. If you get back to me before then, I'll see if I can't work something out."

It was little comfort, but it was their only option. Their conversation was tense as they walked to the car.

"Sheldon we don't have that kind of money lying around."

"I know." Sheldon wracked his brain for a solution. "Couldn't we take out another loan somewhere else?"

"Any lending agency is going to ask about existing debt, and we are already maxed out." She looked at Sheldon. "What about your mother?" she asked.
"She certainly doesn't have the funds. She subsists on her retirement, what's left of my dad's life insurance and her winnings from Indian bingo." He turned to Amy. "What about your mother?"

"In her 60s she's still working at a garden nursery with hippy potheads. She doesn't have any money." Amy suddenly stopped walking looking at her feet forlornly. "We have to give up the house."

"We're not giving up the house," Sheldon said resolutely.

"WE HAVE TO GIVE UP THE HOUSE!" Amy yelled. "We don't have any other option."

Sheldon was always rattled with emotional outbursts, and this time was no different. He stood frozen, looking at her with paralyzing agitation. She shook her head and was about to walk off when he grabbed her arm. She was left effectively stunned by this rare act of physical assertion.

She looked back at him, unsure of whether to be upset or thrilled.

"We're getting that house," he said with more determination than anything she'd heard him say in years.

Then he let go of her and walked to the car. Amy took a deep breath and followed.

Lise-Marie had ended up calling in sick to work. She wasn't sure if Michael had given her something or not, but she woke up with a blinding headache and severe stomach cramps. He probably slept with all his clients. She probably had whatever was going around through the local skanks.

Sometime in the afternoon she heard her phone ring. She was so tempted to ignore it, but checked the caller ID. It was Michael.

"What do you want?" she answered.

"You have to get ready," he said.

"What does that even mean?" she asked groggily. She pulled herself from the bed to close the blinds that were letting in the blinding afternoon light.

"I have on good information that the FBI is going to come by your house sometime this evening for questioning. As your attorney I can assure you that it will be in your best interest to be very careful what you tell them. Confess nothing and have explanations ready for—"

"What are you talking about?" she said, yelling really.

He didn't say anything at first. "Lise-Marie," he sighed.

"You told," she said, with dawning realization. "You turned me in."

"I didn't call any authorities, but I just asked Seibert a few questions, and—"

"BULLSHIT!" she screamed. "You divulged our conversations, you betrayed me, you violated my confidence."

"You may not realize this, but you weren't exactly putting my best interests forward either, Lise-Marie. Besides, you left your digital footprint everywhere. Your getting caught was just a matter of time."
She walked around the room in circles completely disoriented. "You could have at least come and told me in person like a man."

"I would have loved to, but you have those damn security cameras on your porch."

She felt sick to her stomach. "You are scum," she spat. "A vile, despicable, repulsive, son of a bitch."

"That's not fair," he said. "I'm sorry, but I had no choice. If you need anything, like cash or—"

She hung up.

She sat on the edge of the bed, collecting her racing thoughts. What in the hell was she going to say when they got here? How was she going to explain away downloading thirty-two terabits of federal information? She thought she'd been careful, but not enough. She could pin it on someone. Sheldon? Frank?

But then she thought a moment. She was in much worse trouble than avoiding an interview. If what Michael had told her over dinner was true, one false statement could land her in prison. And worse, unlike everyone else…

She knew she was guilty.

She had to avoid that interview altogether. In fact, she had to…

She had to get out of here, and fast. In only her bra and panties, she ran to her closet, pulling a piece of luggage from the back and packing it frantically.

She had to leave. For good.

Amy was in the bathroom sorting the laundry between lights and darks when there was a knock on the door. She went to answer it. When she did, there stood Dr. Seibert.

"Dr. Seibert," she said, stunned.

"Hello, Dr. Fowler," he said. "Is Dr. Cooper available?"

"He is," she said. "Come in and have a seat." Seibert entered the apartment as Amy went to go and get Sheldon, but he unexpectedly walked out. Sheldon looked shocked at the sight of Seibert taking a seat in their armchair.

"Dr. Seibert," he said.

Seibert turned around. "Dr. Cooper, I was hoping we could speak for a moment. Privately, if that's okay."

Taking the hint, Amy retreated to the back of the house, but hid around the corner within earshot.

Meanwhile, Sheldon's mind was racing, and he prepared himself for whatever attacks he might confront related to the harassment charges. Reluctantly, he took a seat in his spot.

Seibert went straight to business. "What do you know about Lise-Marie's data storage or computing practices?" It was literally the last thing Sheldon thought Seibert would ask him.

"Pardon?" Sheldon said.
"I only ask because…" Seibert paused. "You should know that this afternoon a federal warrant was issued for Lise-Marie's arrest."

Sheldon was discombobulated. It didn't make sense. "Why?"

"Between you and me," he explained, "several minor security pings had been recorded for weeks, but last Saturday night, and unauthorized download of more than thirty-two terabits of information from an IP anonymizer set off a chain reaction of security that ended up in DC. Preliminary investigation points to Lise-Marie as the culprit."

The news was shocking, and even Amy took a bold step forward, jeopardizing her stealthy position.

"That's unbelievable," Sheldon said, breathless.

"Not so much," Seibert said. "I suspected that she had gained entry into University servers when she somehow knew I was in San Diego. I hadn't notified anyone I would be there except through an email I sent to my daughter on Friday. As Lise-Marie doesn't know my daughter, there is simply no legitimate way for her to have known that."

"So she hacked into servers just to read your emails?"

"It's unclear what her object was. There isn't a lot of connection to the areas she compromised, and her work was very sloppy. It's anyone's guess what she was after."

Sheldon looked away. "Her machinations know no bounds, and yet my career hangs in the balance based on her lies."

"About that," Seibert said, sitting up. "With her credibility compromised, I'm confident I can intervene in your behalf and even get these charges dismissed without a hearing. But you have to explain that email."

Sheldon hesitated. He caught a glimpse of Amy in the hallway.

Seibert pulled a copy of the correspondence from his briefcase. "I noticed the title was 'Visa concerns.' That is a curious subject line for a proposal of marriage."

"It wasn't a true proposal," Sheldon explained. "Lise-Marie had suggested that as a solution to the visa problem—"

Seibert quickly connected the dots. "That you get married," he said.

Sheldon nodded. "It was to be a legal construct to enable my entry into the country. Nothing more."

"Brilliant," Seibert said, staring hazily off into the distance.

Sheldon was confused. "Excuse me?"

"I thought it was impressive when Leonard slept with that benefactor, but this takes all." He turned his mouth to the side. "Too bad it didn't work out."

"You aren't upset?"

"Upset, no. You were willing to take one for the team." He slapped Sheldon on the back, a gesture Sheldon found perturbing. "Nice work, Cooper."
Amy rolled her eyes and walked off.

Lise-Marie walked up to the door of the house and knocked on the door. There wasn't a light on anywhere in the house, and not even the flicker of a street lamp graced the porch. The church bell from down the way sounded its brassy chime: it was two o'clock in the morning. She turned around at the street, catching the shadow of a nightwalker passing just beyond the gate; a chill of fear went through her. She knocked again, harder.

"Où êtes-vous?" she whispered to herself urgently.

A second later the porch light came on.

"Who is it?" came a familiar voice through the door.

"Lise-Marie," she called. "Let me in."

The door opened and there stood the middle-aged man she had so eagerly awaited squinting against the harsh porch light.

"Come in," he said.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Mary is getting the hang of Styping.

It was only Day Two of Sheldon's exile from Caltech, and though his redemption may be in sight, he was far from at ease. The house situation hung heavy on him, Lise-Marie remained the bane of his existence, and though it was harder for him to articulate it to himself, something was off with Amy.

After lunch, she approached him in the living room, where he sat on the couch with his laptop.

"Today is typically the day I go grocery shopping with the children," she announced.

Sheldon nodded and placed his laptop on the coffee table. "And you would like me to accompany you," he said, preparing to rise.

"No," she said. "I thought you might be able to watch the twins while I went alone."

Sheldon nodded once, with a corrected understanding, and returned his computer to his lap.

She noticed the look on his face. "It'll just go quicker that way," she added.

"Of course," he said.

Without another word, she walked to the table, picked up her purse, and headed for the door. When she got there, two men were standing outside. They were dressed in suits and wearing stern faces.

"Hello?" Amy said, not quite able to hide her alarm.

Both men opened billfolds revealing identification badges. "We're with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," said the one in front. "I'm Agent Gene and my partner is Agent Cox." Agent Cox nodded once. "May we come inside?"

"Sure," Amy said, letting them in. "How may I help you?"

"Is a Dr. Sheldon Cooper available?" Agent Gene asked.

Amy turned and found that Sheldon had risen from the couch and was standing only a few paces behind her. While he was aware that his situation might carry some legal implications, he was stunned at this development. What role did the FBI have in all of this? "I am he," he said, shaken.

"We just have a few questions," Agent Cox said, advancing forward. "Do you know a person by the name of Dr. Lise-Marie Zurbriggan?"

Sheldon looked at Amy, then back at the FBI agents. "I do, actually. She is a colleague of mine."

Agent Gene nodded his head. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Sheldon had joined the gang on their mission to her home, but he had been sequestered in the car.
The last time he'd actually seen Lise-Marie in the flesh had been on Monday. He said so. "In a meeting at work earlier this week."

Both men nodded warily. "Are you sure you haven't seen her since? Maybe communicated with her by email or telephone?"

Sheldon shook his head. "No." He thought a moment. "Why?"

"Well, Dr. Cooper," Agent Cox said. "Dr. Zurbriggen… is missing."

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

Lise-Marie opened her eyes and was greeted by a hand bearing a cup of tea. She looked up and Ian was standing there, saucer in hand. She reached up and took it, then fought to sit erect.

"You know I am not a morning person," she said.

"Aw, that shouldn't be a problem," he said. "It's one o'clock in the afternoon."

"Oh, dear," she said, rubbing one eye. She then took another glance at the tea in her hand. Taking a sip, she discovered it was just like she liked it: Earl Grey, no sugar, one cream. "I never sleep in this late."

"So the world won't begrudge your absence for a few hours," he said. He made room for himself on the couch, lifting up the corner of the blanket she had been resting under before sitting down. He watched her attentively for several moments. "Nearly a decade later and you look the same," he said.

The years, however, had put distance between the thirty-something, cock-sure, suit-clad, American investment banker she'd once known and the man sitting across from her right now. He seemed a bit tamer. There were flecks of grey on the crown on his head. There was a time he would have found a white T-shirt with flannel PJ bottoms to be unacceptable sleepwear. She took another sip.

"You look the same, too," she said, busying herself with her tea.

He looked at her sideways. "We both know that isn't true," he said. He watched her drink silently a few more moments. "How did you find me?" he asked.

"Google," she said.

"Of course. How else?" He shook his head. "You know, the minute they want to take over the world, they can."

"Someone has to," she said. She sat all the way up, and suddenly felt aware of how unpresentable she must look and how bizarre this must be. After not having laid eyes on him for over nine years, she showed up on his doorstep, in the middle of the night, seeking shelter. Now she's on his couch—disheveled and groggy—drinking tea as if she were an invited guest. Even she could see the absurdity of the situation. However, Ian didn't seem particularly alarmed at any of it.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She nodded coyly, as if she were a young girl again, helpless and a bit overwhelmed with life. She thought that the last part might even be true.

"Then let's find you something to eat," he said, and patted her legs before rising. As he went past,
she reached for his hand and he stopped.

"I will only be here a few days," she explained, unsolicited. "I need to get away for a while. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure," he said, and then walked off in search of breakfast.

The federal agents didn't stay long, but left Amy and Sheldon with their cards and advised Sheldon to contact him if he heard anything else. After the men had gone, Sheldon and Amy stared at each other, struggling to absorb what they'd just learned.

"Where could she be?" Sheldon asked rhetorically.

"It's anyone's guess," Amy said. She shook her head.

"Do you think she's left the country? Perhaps she's fled to Mexico, taking advantage of the vulnerabilities in their borders. Or maybe she's using a more brazen approach, hiding in plain sight, daring to remain in Pasadena. Or, she might—"

"I'm honestly just glad to know she's gone," Amy said.

Sheldon was surprised at that response, but then agreed. "You are right. With her disappearance, my standing at the university is all but a foregone conclusion." He dared to smile a little. "Upon further thought, that is indeed good news."

"I'm glad things are working out for you," she said, and walked to the door. She turned to him again. "I'm off to the store," she said, then left.

When the door shut, the fleeting relief Sheldon had felt turned cold. He went back to his spot on the couch and fitfully returned his attention to what he had been doing previously—pricing the market value of his less cherished comic book collectibles. A moment later, the familiar Skype dial tone rang out in the room; a little flag appeared in the right hand corner of his computer. He clicked on it.

"Can you see me?" Mary asked.

"Yes, Mom," Sheldon said, and though he didn't say so, her face looked like an oasis in the desert, as well as a welcomed relief. A man of faith might have even called it a godsend. "I can see you."

"Shelly? Can you see me?" Mary asked again, uncertainly.

"Yes, Mom," Sheldon said louder. "I can see you."

"Shelly? Shelly?" she called again. "Can you see me?"

"Yes, mother. I can see you, I'm fairly confident you can see me as well, and I implore you to inform me of the reason for your contacting me."

"Oh, don't get snippy," she said, still not able to quite hide her excitement. "You can't fault a mother for wanting to see her baby boy every once in a while, now can you?"

"Indeed I cannot," Sheldon replied and smiled. "How are you, Mom?"

"Great!" she chirped, while sitting inexplicably close to the camera. "You know, I'm finally getting the hang of this whole Styping thing. Missy came by last night and got me all hooked up with my
netcam. I'm taking one of those senior citizens classes down at the church to learn about the computer. Soon I'm going to be able to show you a thing or two, Shelly." She tilted her face towards the camera, and Sheldon could see clear up her nose.

"You already have," he said drolly.

"How might you be, sunshine?"

"I'm fine, Mom," he said, but when he heard the words out loud, they didn't sound true.

"That's good," Mary said. "That's all I want to hear."

Just then, Aditi walked in from where she had been playing in her room. She caught a glimpse of the screen of Sheldon's laptop.

"GRANDMA!" she yelled and ran over, climbing onto Sheldon. Sheldon placed the computer in her lap.

"Hello, sweetheart!" Mary said. "How is my little girl doing?"

"Good," she said. "I'm getting taller. Half of my face reaches over the doorknob."

"Well, my oh my, aren't you getting tall. You know what that makes you?"

Aditi shook her head.

"A big girl," Mary proclaimed.

Aditi smiled widely at this, and then looked back proudly at her father. He smiled back a little.

"You wanna hear me sing a song?" Aditi asked excitedly.

"Sure," Mary said.


Surprisingly, Mary was only mildly impressed. "That was cute and all, darling," she said, "but I certainly hope you know you were saying."

"I was asking if bother John was sleeping," Aditi said excitedly.

"She has an aptitude for language," Sheldon explained.

"Well I don't see any problem with it, long as she doesn't forget to speak like a proper American," Mary said. "You come from a long line of folks that have always spoken fine English, Shelly, and I'd hate to see that tradition ruined with all that foreigner talk."

Just then Robert walked out. "Come play with me, Aditi," he whined.

"How is my little Robert?" Mary said.

Hearing his grandmother's voice, he walked over to the computer. He sat down next to Sheldon, leaning against his leg. "Hi, Grandma," he said.

"Hello there, Robert," she said. "Are you doing good?"
"I am not doing 'good,' Grandma," he said, "I am doing well."

Mary looked up at Sheldon. "See?" she said. "It's starting already."

"I finished my book," Robert said.

"What did you think of it? Learn anything? Like some nice American words?"

He nodded his head. "I learned the word 'nudiestertian'."

"Nude what?" Mary asked, scandalized. "Shelly, what are you letting these children read?"

"Mother, you'll find the word is as clean as a whistle. Robert?"

"It means something pertaining to the day before yesterday."

"Well, Robert," she said, clearing her throat, "that, er, is certainly a mouthful."

Just then the front door opened. It was Amy.

"I was only halfway to the store before I realized that I'd left my list at home," she explained.

"Oh, I'm sure you would've gotten by just fine without that," came a disembodied voice.

"Mary?" Amy said, and walked around behind the couch, standing just beyond Sheldon's head.

"I'm sure you could've gotten by just fine without that list," Mary said. "You're smart as a whip."

"Regardless, I have the unsettling tendency to fall prey to the sly marketing practices employed by modern grocery stores, and thus often leave the market with far more than I intended to purchase, only to arrive home to discover that I've forgotten many of the things I expressly came for. I've found my weekly shopping list to be essential."

"Well that's what Shelly's for," Mary said brightly. "That memory of his'll keep the whole list in his noggin without breaking a sweat."

"Hm," Amy said, and walked off.

Mary found the response odd, and it showed on her face. Amy walked off to pick up her list from the kitchen counter. After saying a quick bye to everyone again, she left.

"Amy okay?" Mary asked.

Sheldon looked at the door and then back at his mother.

"Of course," he said, convincing Mary that something was in fact wrong.

"Kids," Mary said, addressing her grandchildren, "go play in your room for a minute. Grandma wants to tell your daddy a secret."

Aditi's face lit up, while Robert looked on with a barely muted fascination.

"What secret?" Aditi asked.

Robert answered. "If she told us Aditi, it wouldn't be a secret."

"That's right," Mary said.
Aditi was saddened by this. "I just wanted to know what kind of secret it was."

"It's about what I'm going to get you for your birthday!" Mary said. "And it's a surprise. So run along to our rooms so I can tell him, okay?"

Both children did as they were told, but walked away slowly, hopelessly intrigued by what their gifts might be. Mary didn't speak again until she was sure they were out of earshot.

"Alright, Sheldon," Mary said, "about Amy—"

"Of course," Sheldon said, impatiently, "but first, what do you plan on getting the twins for their birthday?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mary said.

"But you said you would tell me," Sheldon said, anxiously.

"Shelly, I just said that to get them out of the room. I really want to talk about Amy."

Sheldon's shoulders dropped. "Well, that's disappointing."

Mary continued. "She seems a bit… different. She's not ill, is she?"

"Of course not," Sheldon said. His face betrayed the suppressed emotions that had been haunting him all day. He looked at her a long time, not responding, just battling through the battalions of worries that were on his mind. At that moment, staring into his mother's worried eyes, they all seemed to fade into one large cloud.

"What is it Sheldon?" Mary pleaded softly.

"It's the house," he said finally. "She's been particularly stressed in regards to finalizing the details."

Mary didn't say anything.

A few moments later there was a knock on the door.

"Seems she forgot her keys this time," Mary said nervously, and Sheldon rose to answer the door.

There stood Beverly.

"Why, hello Beverly," Sheldon said. "How are you?"

"I am well," she said, and marched past Sheldon without an invitation, though she remained standing.

"Please have a seat," Sheldon motioned politely, and then walked to the kitchen. Beverly surveyed her available seating options before deciding to sit on the far end of the sofa. "Would you like a beverage?"

"Though I look forward to spending time engaging in far more rousing discourse with you than that which I enjoy across the hall," she began, "I'm afraid my visit is not social in nature."

"Nevertheless," Sheldon said, "I am obliged to provide you with a beverage of some sort, while giving particular attention to its temperature based on your current disposition."
"Shelly, if she's not thirsty, she's not thirsty," Mary called.

"Even so," he replied, "I am bound to social protocol."

Beverly looked around, mystified.

"Sheldon," she said, "either you or I are suffering from a shared auditory hallucination—a scientifically elusive event that has only been verified by anecdotal evidence—or there is a voice that I am hearing—and that you are responding to—that belongs to someone who is, as of yet, unseen."

Sheldon walked over to the monitor and spun it towards where Beverly sat, revealing his mother's pleasant face on the monitor.

"Hello, there," she said. "I'm Mary Cooper, Sheldon's mother."

"Indeed you are," Beverly said coolly. "You possess a passing resemblance to your son."

"That resemblance is the consolation prize you get for carrying them around for nine months," she said. "And what might your name be?"

"Mom," Sheldon answered, "this is the illustrious Dr. Beverly Hofstadter, a well-known neuroscientist, a psychiatrist who is high demand, and an award-winning author."

"That is quite a résumé you have there, Dr. Hofstadter," Mary said. "How'd you meet my boy? Y'all work at the school together?"

"I am Leonard's mother," she said flatly. She felt her head. "I'll take hot water with lemon if you have it," she said to Sheldon.

"I knew I recognized that last name," Mary said. "Well, I am pleased to meet you. Sheldon has really taking a liking to you."

"And I to him," she said.

"Well, I must say the same about your son," Mary said. "He is a wonderful young man."

"As I've often been told," Beverly said. She turned to Sheldon. "Is Amy here?" she asked.

"She went to the grocery store," Sheldon said. A second later, Amy walked through the door.

Her entrance was followed by silence. Everyone was sufficiently taken aback by the coincidence. Amy, for her part, decided to provide an explanation.

"I left my purse," she said. She then tossed her keys into the bowl and collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table.

"I presume you will be postponing your shopping trip," Sheldon said.

Amy looked up, annoyed. "Yes, Sheldon, I will be postponing my shopping trip."

Beverly noted her curt tone. "Despite my inclination to explore the implications of that last exchange, I must proceed with the initial point of my visit. It concerns a certain physician by the name of Dr. London Singh."

"IIIII knoooow hiiiiim," Mary said, drawing out each word with affectionate warmth. "He moved
to New Jersey, but used to live in Galveston."

"Interesting," Beverly said. "He's never mentioned it."

"Oh, yes," Mary continued. "He is really humble, a great man. You know him, Shelly."

Sheldon's face registered doubt. "He doesn't sound familiar." He handed Beverly her lemon water then moved towards his spot.

"Oh, sure he does. You remember that doctor—the one that tried to get that Mexican peso from out of your nose?"

Sheldon winced at the memory. "Indeed I do, and he came quite close to ripping my face off in the process."

"Only because you wouldn't sit still. Anyway, he's finally retired."

"Oh joy to the citizens of Galveston, Texas," Sheldon said with mock relief. "They have slain the Jabberwocky. O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay."

Mary leveled a look of displeasure at him. "He's not dead, Shelly, he retired. And besides, he was an excellent and compassionate doctor. He gave me a big discount when he got that cyst off my uterus."

Sheldon was repulsed, then alarmed. "Wait one minute: I thought he was an ear, nose, throat doctor?"

She shook her head. "Nope, a gynecologist. But he was really talented when it came to doctoring. He could do a little of anything. Really handy like that."

"Mom, you can't just do a 'little of everything'. Each physician must have a dedicated specialty. The human body is not a Ford truck that you can just tinker with till you figure it out."

"I hate to interrupt this stroll down memory lane," Beverly interrupted, "but Mrs. Cooper, with all due respect, I believe we're speaking of two entirely different physicians."

"You said his name was Landon Sheen, right? Stout man, about yay high, red hair and green eyes?"

"No. London Singh. He's of Sri Lankan extraction."

"On, then no. This man was as white as a China man is yellow."

"Returning to my original point," Beverly continued. "Dr. Singh has a long history of conducting research on the brain circuitry of married couples. He will be retiring soon, and is in the process of closing out his final study. He risks ending his career on a dismal note, however, having waited until the last minute to procure test subjects and expend the balance of his federal grant. He must do so by the end of this weekend. I thought you and Amy might be interested in participating."

"We aren't married," Sheldon said.

"Of course not," Beverly said. "I would hardly expect two persons of your intellectual acumen to engage in an ancient ritual created at a time when people thought the world was flat. My own marriage was a foolish result of both youthful folly and the social pressures of the time. If given the chance, I wouldn't repeat it."
"But," Amy said, referencing her own affection for her offspring to Beverly's statement, "then you likely wouldn't have had your children."

Beverly shrugged. "I guess that's a compelling enough reason to consider repeating a mistake."

"Now I'm going to stop you right there," Mary said. "My own marriage was the stuff of nightmares, but it has never tarnished me against the entire institution of holy matrimony." She looked off in the distance, lips pursed and her eyes squinted. "I loved Shelly's father. It's his actions I hated."

Beverly stared at the screen a moment. "Considering that your husband engaged in behavior that you admittedly 'hated,' am I to take it that you felt compelled, or perhaps obligated, to make that statement expressing an antiquated idea on the role of 'love' in marriage so as to maintain an official policy that matches your religious dogma?"

"Pardon me, Dr. Hofstadter," Mary said, "but if that's a swipe at my faith, I would think that a psychiatrist would know how to agree without being disagreeable."

"Great," Beverly said. "Now you're sounding like my son. Small wonder you two get along."

"Regardless," Amy said, returning to her original point, "we aren't married, so we likely don't qualify."

"Ah, I see your confusion," Beverly said. "Considering the highly-contested definition of marriage—both socially and legally—in our society, for Dr. Singh's purposes, he has defined the term as two persons who are in a committed, domicile relationship with a sexual component. I can clearly see that you have fulfilled the first two criteria, and the existence of your twins suggests that you likely meet the third one as well. Were your children conceived through coitus, Sheldon?" Beverly asked.

"Dear Lord Almighty!" Mary cried. "I don't know how else you would think they would have been conceived."

"Dearest Mary," Beverly said. "The world of conception is populated with methodologies that make the old-fashioned way appear very old-fashioned indeed."

"What exactly would we be required to do?" Amy asked.

"Go to his testing facility in San Diego, and participate in various activities. You would have to report tomorrow and would return on Sunday."

"Shelly, I think you should leave this whole thing alone," Mary said.

"You would be compensated for your efforts with a minimum of $20,000," Beverly added.

"Then on second thought, perhaps you should consider it," Mary said.

"That's an exorbitant amount for a research opportunity," Sheldon said. "What's the catch?"

"Why are you so cynical about life?" Mary asked. "There isn't always catch to everything."

"There's a catch often enough to make it a necessary inquiry in most bargains for this nature," Sheldon said. Beverly nodded in agreement.

"And this time is no exception. In exchange for your participation, Dr. Singh requests that you
paint the walls during your stay.

Sheldon and Amy looked at each other. It seemed like a minor request.

"May we have a moment?" Amy said while rising to her feet. They both made their way to the hallway.

"Amy, I am sure you are reluctant to do this," Sheldon said. "However, considering the financial implications, I believe we are left with little other—"

"And the children?" Amy interrupted.

"I'm sure my mother would keep them. She's been looking for a reason to visit."

Amy mulled over the matter for a few moments more. "I think we should do it too," she said.

"You do?" Sheldon said, somewhat taken aback at the ease of the decision.

Amy nodded. "We need the money," she said, and walked off. They returned to the living room.

"Mom," Sheldon said, "would you consider coming out here to mind the children while Amy and I are gone?"

Mary thought about it a moment. "Well, that is awfully short notice," she said, "but I can't say no, really. I'd love to spend a little time with my grandchildren."

"Then it is decided," Sheldon said. "Amy and I will send you your ticket within the hour."

"How are you going to do that?" Mary asked.

"By email, Mom," Sheldon said. He rethought the matter. "Actually, I'll send it to Missy and she'll get it to you. Just come with your ID to the airport."

Beverly rose. "Thank you for your time. Regrettably, I must now attend to my son and his family. He is a rather jealous person. He must have gotten that from his father."

She saw herself out.

Amy and Sheldon both looked at each other, clearly reeling from the sudden turn of events.

"I'll tell the children," Amy said, and walked off.

Sheldon took a seat at the kitchen table, a bit reflective. The day ahead of him would be a long one, and he had willfully submitted to the meddling of a mental health professional. The inevitable apprehension about such an arrangement was beginning to set in. He was lost in thought for several minutes when he heard his mother's forgotten voice.

"Shelly, can you see me? Shelly? Shelly?"

It was late in the afternoon, and there was just a sliver of sunlight left as the sun made its decent over the horizon. It was quickly becoming the laziest day she'd had in memory, and Lise-Marie had barely moved from her original position on the couch, only rising to shower and to change clothes. She'd even eaten on the couch. She looked up when Ian appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He was wearing a pair of slacks and a polo shirt.
"Ta-da!" he said, his arms outstretched.

Lise-Marie chuckled a bit. "Is that what is passing for dress wear these days?" she asked.

"No," he said, "but I thought I could at least look presentable if we were to go out and have dinner."

Lise-Marie's face went white and gravely serious.

"Oh, excuse me, Lise," he said apologetically. "I hope I didn't give out the wrong impression. I just thought you might want to get out of the house, that's al—"

"No, I know," she said. "It's just that—" She stopped.

Leaving the house was risky.

"I thought we could stay in tonight. I am so very tired from my trip and would love to enjoy just one more night of relaxation."

Ian took a few steps closer, warming to the idea.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "We could order in and watch some television or maybe an action film. Do you still like sci-fi?"

Ian nodded. "I do. Here, I'll grab some take out menus and you can decide what you want," he said, calling over his shoulder as he made his way to the kitchen. "There's a Chinese place near here that has the most amazing dim sum, and the food is cheap."

As he disappeared around the corner, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. This was going to be harder than she thought.
Sheldon and Amy had stayed up late getting ready for the impromptu trip that seemed to be ordained by providence. It was the first time ever they had taken a trip together away from the twins for more than a few hours, and if Sheldon was apprehensive about the whole thing, Amy was completely nerve wracked. They passed each other as they worked in a frenzy of packing and cleaning and worrying—their faces marked with suspicious but silent eyes. Sheldon crouched over his laptop and talked to Missy on the phone, wrangling with her over red-eye flight schedules. Amy seized the moment to pause and watch him from afar, her face a pensive mix of fatigue, reflection, and—in spite of herself—longing.

When Sheldon finally got into bed at midnight, Amy was still stirring around the apartment, dusting shelves, packing bags, and leaving sticky notes around the house. However, she was lying next to him when the alarm clock sounded hours later (at the brutal hour of five in the morning), and soon they set about the day's activities. Sheldon was busy loading the car, and was making a second trip down the stairs with a large tote and a sleeping bag when he and his mother suddenly met up on the second floor.

"My oh my, Shelly," she said, setting her single piece of luggage on the floor. "I didn't expect to see you here, moving about. How are you doing?"

"Sleep-deprived and plagued with an inexplicable soreness in my lower back," Sheldon answered. "It is as if I slept on a shoe."

"Oh, quit your fussing," Mary replied. "Last night I slept in the upright position between a man that weighed 100 pounds more than he should and a woman who had one martini too many. I dreamt I was being crushed to death by a giant olive."


She threw her arms around him. "Only for you, Shelly. Only for you."

"Thanks, Mom," he said. "Let me help you with that." He took her suitcase and followed her back up the stairs, bearing double the cargo he had first set out with. When they entered the apartment, Amy was emerging from the twin's room. The two sleepy, pajama-clad tykes were filing out behind her like little ducklings.

"Hello, Mary," she said. "I apologize for the short notice."

"No need," Mary said. "If it really bothered me, I would have declined." She stooped in front of the twins, and they groggily rubbed their eyes, ambling over to the grandmother they hadn't seen in quite some time outside of a computer monitor. They just barely mustered up the energy to give her a hug. "Aw. Aren't they precious?" Mary cooed.

"Well, check-in is at nine, and with any luck we should arrive in the nick of time." She took a final
glance around the apartment. "You will find that I have left detailed notes for you in the red folder in the kitchen."

Mary looked at the dangling sticky notes scattered around the apartment. "And some other places, too," she muttered.

"The rest, I am sure, you will be able to figure out on your own."

"Oh please," Mary said confidently. "I raised three kids—including a set of twins. I wouldn't do anything to them I wouldn't have done for my own children."

Sheldon seemed to be alarmed at that statement. "With all due respect," he said, more sternly than Mary liked, "that is a standard that requires modification."

"And what modification might that be?" she asked.

"Principally, while we are gone, there is to be no cod liver oil, no matching outfits, and absolutely no Sunday school."

"Goodness gracious, Shelly," Mary replied, appalled. "You make those things sound bad."

"I just prefer children whose digestive tracts are not lined with fish grease, that don't resemble runaways from Munchkinland, and who don't have nightmares of a bloodied dead man whenever someone says 'cross your T.'"

"You only had that nightmare once," Mary said. "Maybe if George and Missy had dreamt of our Lord they'd done a little less sinning."

"Mom, you must promise me."

She shrugged. "Well, Amy hasn't said anything."

Amy looked at one of them and then the other without saying a word.

"Mom!" Sheldon said.

Mary relented. "Fine. No healthiness, no fun and no Jesus. You have my word."

"Thank you," Sheldon said.

"But you can't stop me from praying for them," she said. "And based on what you're telling me, I'm gonna have to double up."

Clenching his teeth, Sheldon took a hard breath, just barely swallowing his annoyance.

The trip down the coast was fraught with one "adventure" after another. Despite their attempt at an early start, they hit some traffic heading into Anaheim, and they crept along the freeway in bumper to bumper traffic that set them back at least an hour. Just as the roads cleared and the flow of traffic began to pick up, the car was plagued by a flat tire. since the only help Sheldon could offer in such a situation was to calculate the vehicle's fuel consumption efficiency, he and Amy waited—stranded on the shoulder of the freeway—for their car club to come and put on the spare. As soon as they were mobile again, they drove to the nearest garage for a new tire and, as a result, were doomed to more waiting as they sat cramped in the hot waiting area. They were four hours into a two-hour trip and twenty minutes from their destination when they hit a wall of rain just as they
entered a suburb just outside of San Diego. By the time they reached the address that Amy had scrawled on the back of a pizza coupon, their patience had worn thin and nerves were frayed. Sheldon seemed to be particularly frazzled. The road ran out and Amy followed the water-soaked private dirt path down to what seemed like the end of the world. There, emerging from a clearing of brush and palm trees, was a small house. Amy squinted at it as her wipers battled the torrents cascading down her windshield.

"Is this it?" Sheldon asked, incredulous.

"It says so," she said, and glanced at the GPS for confirmation. Instead, the screen bore the image of a swirling circle that appeared whenever the signal was lost.

Silently, they waited for the furious deluge to subside some. When the pitter patter seemed to fade and the sun peeked out, ever so little, from behind the storm clouds, Amy and Sheldon made their way for the door. However, they only got halfway there before the bucketing rains began again. In seconds, they were soaked to the skin. Amy yanked the front doorknob only to find it locked.

"Where is the key?" Sheldon called over the din of rain clashing on the metal roof.

"I don't know," Amy said, searching her surroundings for some indication as to where a key might be… tucked in a plant, inside a fake rock, hidden in a trick bottom in the mailbox. After a moment of deliberation, she went for the obvious and stooped down, lifting the corner to the doormat. There sat a metal key glistening under beads of moisture.

"Shrewd hiding place," Sheldon deadpanned.

Amy snatched it up and stuck it in the keyhole. A moment later, both she and Sheldon fell through the door, bringing with them a small storm themselves. Moisture from their bodies pooled on the floor of the "foyer," which was merely a patch of tile just inside the door. Gasping for air and chilled to the bone, they shook down like stray dogs. It was a moment later before it dawned on them that they were all alone. A quick perusal revealed a lodging place that was dusty and cold.

"Where is everyone?" Amy asked.

"Here's the catch," Sheldon pronounced drolly. Just beyond the front door was a communal area, littered with stray folding chairs, an oddly placed coffee table, and a mismatched couch. A shotgun hallway led all the way out to the back exit, and on either side of the hall were doors to a handful of bedrooms. The "decoration" of the space was bare—limited to a portrait of an unrecognizable figure and a vase of dead flowers. To their left was a kitchen that, even from a distance, didn't exactly beg to be explored. Finally, as promised, the paint was in poor condition.

Sheldon paused a beat before announcing, "We're going home." He turned back for the door.

"Wait, Sheldon," Amy called. "Doesn't this remind you of something?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. "My recurring nightmare of meeting an early grave from being trapped in a dusty, old death trap."

"Actually," Amy said, an odd fondness in her voice, "it reminds me of our time in the cute blue cottage on Mulberry Street." Sheldon watched apprehensively as she took a tentative step forward and looked around, admiringly, at the molding trim above her head and hardwood floors below her feet. Her gentle hand brought his attention to the wainscoting that lined the walls. "This place is a bit larger and suffers from disuse," she added, "but the atmosphere is familiar."
She walked over to a wall, running her hands down the flaky surface, and Sheldon watched on silently. He looked up and could only see a ceiling infested with cobwebs and the tall picture windows with loose, cracked panes; he struggled to be equally as charmed. Seeking comfort and warmth, he walked over to the far wall and poked around at the fireplace, only to discover it was purely decorative. His disappointment was obvious. He searched for a reason for escape.

"I'm famished," he announced, and immediately whipped out his phone, intending to search for a place to get something to eat. After several moments of waiting for Google to load, however, his face slowly transformed into a look of terror.

"What is it?" Amy asked.

He spoke with a hushed panic. "I don't have any cellular service." A second wave of horror hit him, and he scrambled through his messenger bag and pulled out his iPad. "Or Internetservice," he said, practically growling. His head snapped to Amy. "We must leave at once," he said, clutching his iPad with mounting ire. "I'd sooner lie down in a water-logged ditch pining after my own demise than spend another minute in this castaway cottage, cut off from civilization and imprisoned in filth."

Amy spoke up. "Maybe it was meant for us to just spend some quality time together without distraction."

"Things aren't meant to be, Amy," he retorted, "they just are. Besides, how will we be reached if something goes wrong back home?"

Immediately, they both raced off and scrambled to look for the same thing. Amy rose triumphantly, a landline phone clutched in her hand. "There is a phone," she said.

"Then let's call Mom," Sheldon said. He walked over and hit the speaker button before punching the numbers that would conjure up his mother in. After several rings, however, his mother didn't answer and, instead, he was greeted by her voicemail requesting that her callers leave their phone number, explain their reason for calling, and that they have a blessed day. He just hung up. "I wonder why she even has a cell phone," he moaned.

"Let's call our apartment," Amy said, and typed in a new set of numbers into the phone's face. Again there was no answer, but this time, they were greeted to their own voicemail, albeit with a different message.

"This is Aditi (giggle, giggle) and I'm five years old." "You weren't supposed to laugh, Aditi," — Robert— "and you're not five yet." Aditi, "I'm almost five. Daddy said so." Mary's voice could be heard next. "You have reached the Fowler-Cooper residence. Please leave a message after the beep."

After the beep neither spoke, and instead they both stared at the phone longingly, as if it were some mystic portal to their life back home. Then they look at each other—desperate and weary—reminiscent of stranded lovers out of some old sci-fi movie who can't go back to their home planet until they complete their mission of saving the universe.

Or their relationship.

Sheldon simply left the number typed into the side of the phone, then hung up and walked off. Amy could hear cabinets opening and closing in the other room. She knew him too well to feign ignorance about what he was doing. She wasn't surprised to find him surveying the available cleaning supplies in a large closet set off from the kitchen, and he was no doubt compiling a mental
to-do list to make his surroundings survivable, if not suitable to his demanding standards.

Without turning to her, he spoke. "I liked that place," he said. He was talking about their old
cottage back in Washington. He finally looked at her, and that's when she saw that he seemed to,
likewise, be transported—in spite of himself—to another time. Something in his face made her
think that maybe they should never have left. It might have worked there, in Olympia. They could
have made a life for themselves. They could have reached their goals there, couldn't they?

"In many respects, however, this place is better," Sheldon said suddenly, "because it has a bed and
a working fridge, which is more than can be said for the blue cottage when we first arrived."

Amy drew closer and looked at him with a mix of resignation and amusement. "So, what do we
have?" she asked.

"I'm rather impressed with the available supplies. I half anticipated to find just bottles of white
vinegar and ripped up T-shirts. But there are gloves, sponges, various soaps, wood polish, proper
mops with buckets, and strong cleaners—caustic enough to kill a small zoo worth of animals." He
bent over and picked up a pail of white paint. Amy took it from his hand.

"Let's get to work," she said, and walked off.

Lise-Marie wiped the bathroom mirror with her hand and stared into the foggy glass. A towel was
piled high on top her head, the only adornment on her otherwise bare face. Seeing herself in the
mirror that way arrested her attention and forced her to view herself in a way that left her face to
face with raw honesty.

And it scared the shit out of her.

The front door opened and closed, and she glanced up at the wall clock—it was noon. She hadn't
been sure if Ian had been in the house at all, but his sudden reappearance confirmed that he hadn't
been.

"Who goes there?" she called from behind the bathroom door.

"A ruthless assailant," he called up.

She smiled. Hurriedly slipping into her slippers and a robe, she rushed to the top of the stairs and
found Ian at the bottom looking up. At the sight of her, he diverted his eyes, unsure of where to
look.

"Spa day?" he asked, playfully, and she looked down at herself, surveying her attire.

"It's been a slow day," she said. "Give me a minute." She scurried back to the bathroom.

Minutes later she re-emerged, her hair pulled into a tight bun, and deciding against her original
ensemble of jeans and a sweatshirt, she threw on a summer dress buried deep in her suitcase. She
walked down the stairs. He was sitting on the couch, his head lying back, watching television. He
looked up when she entered the room.

"Are you headed somewhere," he asked.

She just shook her head and plopped down beside him on the couch. She laid her head back.

"What are you watching?" she asked after a moment.
"A cooking show," he said. He turned his face to hers. "Today's theme: beets."

"I find beets rather refreshing," she said.

He shrugged. "I never eat them."

"Then you are surely missing out," she said.

They remained staring at each other a moment longer as the sound of dicing and whirring and simmering hummed on the TV. She couldn't shake the feeling that this was all very odd. But the feeling was slowly being replaced with something more like belonging.

It made her remember things she thought she'd forgotten.

"Did you rest well?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Good," he said.

"And you? I assume you were returning from work," she said.

He nodded without further explanation, and then turned back towards the television. "Is this making you ashungry as it's making me?" he asked.

Her eating habits were dreadful, and it was common for her to have one meal a day. But she humored him and nodded again.

"I'm afraid all I have are beets," he said.

She started to laugh a little.

"Seriously, what would you like?" he asked. She went to answer, and then though about her finances. Using her credit or debit cards would be risky, and her cash had to be used judiciously, or she may run out before…

Before she could get out of town.

"I'll just have a bowl of cereal," she said.

"Nonsense," he said, suddenly sitting up. "Something hot would be better. There is a lovely sandwich shop just down the street with amazing Reubens. They make their lunchmeats in house, like in the old-style delicatessens. I think—"

She cut him off. "I would rather, you know, stay inside."

"Why?" he asked, disbelieving. "You can't still be tired."

"No, no," she said. "It's only…I'm vegetarian and gluten-free," she lied, mentally trying to remember what she'd eaten the night before that may give her away. "It's hard finding foods I can eat."

"This is Northern California," he said with a smirk. "There are more of you than me." Still, he noted the hesitation on her face. He rose looking at her more intently, and then held out his hand, beckoning for her to stand. "Besides, Lise, I seldom have guests. To treat you would be my pleasure," he said.
She tried to remain calm and maintain her resolve, but was softening inside. Besides, she had run out of excuses.

"Fine," she said, finally relenting. "Just, let me find my glasses."

He nodded. "I'll be on the porch."

As they generally did, Amy and Sheldon made an efficient team. In short order, they had done away with the more egregious smells, stains, and dirt that lingered about the place. For the first time in days, they fell into easy conversation that, though sparse, was littered with topics other than the house, schooling of the twins, Amy's career prospects and... Lise-Marie. Despite the work, it felt refreshing.

They were a couple hours into painting when, as the finale of a dreary day, intermittent rain and dreary clouds blocked out what was left of an afternoon sun, and it was as if sunset had come 45 minutes ahead of schedule. They worked by the dull bulbs in the living room lamps, making the task more challenging. As they seemed poised to finish for the day, Sheldon made one more request that Amy call Beverly, "one more time."

"I have called her several times," Amy said after what must have been the twentieth of such requests, "and have failed to reach her."

"Which is precisely why I am suggesting you call her again," Sheldon said.

Amy looked at him, bringing the back of her hand (the only part not covered in paint) across her forehead and wiping away the sweat from her brow. "Why are you so anxious to call her and why must I be the one to do it?"

"I am anxious to call her since, aside from the expectation of painting and the physical address of the place, this experience bears little to no resemblance—in any respect—to the endeavor we anticipated," he explained. "I would like to know why not."

"Eloquently stated," she said, returning her paintbrush to the wall. "Word it that way when you speak with Beverly."

"But you are just as capable of doing so as I am," he replied. She turned to him, noting his petulant tone, and was suddenly very annoyed.

"Sheldon, it is notoriously obvious that you have placed that woman on an excessively high pedestal—and for reasons that have more to do with your view of her as a proxy mother figure than on any basis of her true merit, I might add."

Sheldon froze pensively at this assertion. "Should I be apologetic for acknowledging her suitability as a source of guidance?"

"Not necessarily," Amy said. "However, you would prefer that I complain to her instead of yourself, lest you draw her ire and tarnish the near flawless relationship that she and you have enjoyed up to this point."

Sheldon looked at her a moment, pausing to reflect. "Why, yes," he said simply.

"You don't see a problem with that?" she asked, even more annoyed.

"No," he answered.
She shook her head. "Sheldon you always, always make me do the dirty work," she said. "With ever more frequency, I've become the bad cop emeritus in this relationship while you coast along as the beloved and indulgent good cop. More upsettingly, it doesn't even cross your mind that sometimes I get tired of being the one to explain to your mother why we won't be going to Galveston this year for Christmas, or discipline the children, or risk getting insulted by Beverly."

Sheldon waited a beat before answering. "But you're so good at it."

She stared at him blankly, then dropped her paintbrush in a plastic bin on the floor and marched off.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To bed," she said, and disappeared behind one of the hallway doors. A moment later she re-emerged. "That room looked creepy," she said, and walked into another.

When he reached her, she was pulling her sleeping bag from its case, and spreading it over the bed.

"Amy, aren't you hungry?"

"No," she said, and continued to change clothes and prepare for bed. He looked on silently for quite some time. When she was finished, she zipped herself up completely in the sleeping bag, without bidding him a good night, an admonition to sleep tight, or a wish that bed bugs would not bite.

There was also no kiss.

There hadn't been one for several nights.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?" he asked. "I spotted an unopened chocolate bar in the kitchen and there is some indication that you may be on your menses."

"I AM NOT ON MY MENSES!" she yelled. Though she couldn't see it, Sheldon took a step back, startled at the eruption. He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and sat on his side of the bed, just watching her. She could feel his weight against the mattress.

"You are, however, upset with me," she could hear him say through the muffle of the sleeping bag. She felt the question sink in. For some reason, admitting the fact felt distressing.

"Yes, Sheldon," she said. "I am upset with you." It was more like anger. She was angry.

"And you have been for some time," he continued.

Her voice dropped in volume, but not in anger. "Yes, Sheldon, I have been for some time." Knowing him, she anticipated a third question, as he typically asked questions in a logical progression of threes. In fact she could easily predict what the next question would be: "Will you continued to be upset with me for some time?" So sure she was of it, that she had in mind her answer for him ready: "I don't know how far into the future I'll be upset. I just want some sleep."

However several moments passed and no question came. As each silent second ticked by, she was increasingly anxious by the lack of what seemed inevitable. Curious, she unzipped the top part of the sleeping bag and peered over the side of the fabric to where he sat on the bed. He was watching her, his face unmistakably forlorn.

"Amy?" he said.
She sighed, bracing herself, and for some reason, her curious anticipation instantly returned to anger. "What, Sheldon?"

He didn't follow up with anything for a long while, and finally she just turned back over, closing her eyes and committing to sleep. At last, he spoke.

"Amy," he began again. "Do you love me anymore?"

It was the last thing she expected him to say, and the unexpected frankness of the question jolted her awake. Turning over again, she looked at his shadowed face in the deepening dark, and sat up the slightest bit. He sat motionless, dutifully awaiting her answer, and she could feel herself welling up.

"Of course I love you," she said, breathlessly. She bit her trembling bottom lip, stilling it. She shook her head once. "I wouldn't even know how to begin to stop loving you."

His voice grew small, just above a whisper. "Are you happy with me?"

She covered her face, struggling to contain the emotions battling inside of her. She wasn't prepared for this line of questioning, not from Sheldon. This wasn't logical and this wasn't a progression of threes. This was something else.

"I want to be," she answered after a moment. "But lately I've just been so…" she stopped there, thinking about everything. There was so much to think about. And not all of it had to do with Sheldon. "I've been frustrated lately. Sometimes I want to blame you, and sometimes I just want to blame myself. It seems that it may be the plight of woman to have less, and some force is goading me to be content with that. I chide myself for wanting more."

Sheldon thought for a moment. "Then I direct your attention to the Roommate Agreement, Section 1, and Part A."

She thought a moment too, mentally flipping through the pages and scanning the words, but coming up short. Then she realized that the portion he referred to was on Page 1—the very first item. It was a passage she'd forgotten about. "Our partnership is one of intellectual equals and thus, necessarily, requires a mutual respect of ideas, actions, decisions, and ambitions."

"I believe that as much today," he said, "as on the first day we ratified the contents of the Agreement and had the document notarized."

Amy smiled, then wiped a single tear from her eye. "Help me believe that you believe that Sheldon," she said with a snifflle.

He looked at her anxiously. "I want you to be happy."

She nodded, then reached out a hand, placing it over where he sat on the bed. "I know," she said. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, Sheldon," she said, then lay back in her sleeping bag.

"Good night, Amy," Sheldon said, then walked off, preparing himself for bed as well.

Dr. Seibert was speaking with the agents for the fifth time in two days, and the questions they asked that, at first, seemed probing and insightful had grown repetitive—disturbingly so. Siebert had all but memorized his tired responses that usually amounted to a big "I don't know." So, it was shocking when they showed up in person, and with a different line of questioning.
"Does she have any known relations, whether they be family or otherwise, in the United States?"

*Interesting.* "So you think she's still in the country?" Seibert asked.

"Please, just, answer the question," Agent Cox admonished.

Even if the questions had changed, his answers hadn't. "I don't know," Seibert said. His own lack of answers frustrated him; his professional reputation and that of the University was in play. He needed the trust of these agents if he ever was going to pull himself out of this mess.

"Do any of these people ring a bell?" Agent Gene asked. He produced several pages fastened with a staple. They featured a handful of names per page, some names accompanied by a picture, while others hovered beneath a blank box. Seibert went through the names without recognition: Maria Santos, Kevin Hsu, Mayra Bailey, Jackson Huntley, Ian North. He shook his head.

The agents nodded. "We'll be in contact," they said, and left.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Amy thinks about the children.

Sheldon stood at the foot of the bed, mentally debating if he should go at all. A long-awaited nighttime phenomenon beckoned for him to come outside. The Perseids (so called because the point from which they appear lies in the constellation Perseus) were associated with the comet Swift-Tuttle and their meteors were most visible in the hours before dawn. Raj had first turned Sheldon—all of the guys in fact—on to the meteor shower over ten years ago, and in the years that followed, they'd made the annual pilgrimage to the Caltech observatory while listening to the shtick of Howard's latest pickup lines or Leonard's complaints about Penny's latest boyfriend. One of the most prolific meteor showers observable from Planet Earth, it was as much a part of his summer as Comic-Con.

The first year after they'd met, Sheldon had decided to introduce the Perseids to Amy. Far away from the background noise of prattling scientists and away from the light pollution that plagued the city of Los Angeles, they'd set up a telescope somewhere off to the side of I-5, and spent one late August night admiring the heavens. They had the following year, as well, and then the year after that.

Life, however, got in their way. Years went by and the Perseids had gone on without them as they went on without each other. Even after they reunited, the nighttime vigil had somehow become a thing of the past. Until last year. In the wee hours of the night in late August, with each one of them bearing a slumbering three-year-old on their shoulders, they'd scurried up to the roof of their apartment building and snatched a few giddy moments for themselves, reliving a cherished moment from their past. They liked it so much that they'd made a verbal pact—and then an amendment to the Relationship Agreement—they'd never miss it again.

But instead of waking her up, he stood at the foot of the bed mentally debating if he should go at all.

"Sheldon?" croaked groggily into the darkness. Startled by her voice, he took a step back and over to the vanity, nervously fidgeting with nothing in particular. "Are you up?"

He took a deep breath. "The Perseids," is all he said.

There was no response from her for a moment, and then he could sense her tucking herself back into bed.

"I'm tired," she said.

"So we won't go and watch this year?" he said.

"You can," she said.

Sheldon looked at the door then back at the direction to where Amy lay.

"I would rather you came," he said.
Silence.

"You should go," she said finally.

He paused a moment, then left, gingerly shutting the door behind him. He went down the hall, into the kitchen, out of the back door, and up a worn path to a clearing several yards from the house. The night sky was radiant, revealing many more stars in its bejeweled expanse than could be seen back home. Even so, something was off. For all its brilliance, the sky was perfectly still and a vague gloom loomed overhead as much as the stars did. After several moments of waiting, he seriously considered just going back inside. He pulled his hand from his pocket, and looked at the time.

"How is it looking?" came a voice from behind him.

Sheldon turned around. It was Amy.

"Poorly," he said, his gloomy remark betrayed by a hint of cheer at her arrival that he couldn't quite hide.

She drew closer, standing right next to him. "A little patience may be in order," she said.

Duly chastised, Sheldon returned his attention to the heavens with a renewed optimism.

"There!" Amy said, pointing off towards the left. It was a shooting star, a rogue meteor dashing across the firmament. That one turned to two, which turned to ten—little flashes of light dotting here and there. Amy and Sheldon both stood there—silent and awestruck—at the visual nighttime display. On another night, Sheldon and Amy might have split their attention between the sky and their phones, madly scrambling for more trivia, information and statistics that might enhance the experience. But tonight, exiled in the middle of nowhere, it was just the two of them and the sky.

"It really is magnificent," Sheldon said after a moment.

The air was brisk, and the tips of Amy's hands were cold; she gently tucked one under Sheldon's arm and, goaded by the warmth, added the other. She could sense him tense up, startled at the gesture. Then he exhaled, his body relaxing. He looked down at her, her face sleepy but bright. She glanced up at him, too, and then looked back at the falling sky.

"It really is," she whispered.

It was half past six in the morning, but Mary was already stirring, making a spread of biscuits, bacon, and cheese eggs for the children. She'd noticed they were early risers, and figuring they'd be up at any minute, she wanted a meal waiting for them when they did. Considering the hour, she was surprised to hear several firm knocks at the apartment door. Looking through the peephole, she discovered it was Bernadette. Upon opening the door, she also noticed two little boys in either hand.

"Why, hello there, Bernadette," she said, staring inquisitively at the young ones. "Just how may I be of assistance to you?"

"I was wondering if Amy was home," Bernadette replied anxiously, looking past Mary and into the apartment.

"I'm afraid she's not," Mary said. "She and Sheldon went off on a little getaway, just the two of them."
"Hmm," Bernadette said pensively. "That must be why I couldn't reach her." She looked up at Mary pleadingly. "I know this may be a presumptuous request, but I am in a desperate situation. Our childcare provider is closed today because of a power outage. Howard has to go in today and I can't get the day off. Is there any chance you could keep my kids?"

"So these are your boys?" Mary said, a bit amused. Bernadette nodded yes. "Well, isn't that mighty brave of you, taking on some foreign kids like that."

"I was a little nervous at first," Bernadette confessed, "but they are sweet children. We're really lucky."

"You are that," Mary said, crossing her arms. "You never know what you're going to get with the free ones, much less with the ones you buy."

Bernadette groaned. "Will you be able to keep them?" she asked.

"Oh absolutely," Mary said, cheerfully. "It would be my pleasure."

"Thank you so much," Bernadette said, deeply relieved.

"Now let's get some names."

"This one is Adam," Bernadette said, lifting the boy's arm like a winner in a boxing match, "and this one is Joel."

"So I guess the Jews won out," Mary muttered.

"It's a recurring theme in my life," Bernadette muttered. "Anyway, they shouldn't be much trouble. If they do get fretful, they have some snacks and toys with them."

"Great. My grandkids need some playmates."

"I'm afraid the twins kind of just stare at my boys. I think they might be afraid of them."

"Nonsense," Mary said. "They'll be whooping and hollering together in no time. I'll see to it. Now come on boys," Mary said, taking each one by the hand and leading them inside. "I hope you're hungry. I made breakfast." She looked back at Bernadette, whispering. "They can eat ham, can't they?"

Bernadette froze. "As long as my mother-in-law doesn't find out," she said.

Mary made the gesture of zipping her lips.

"Thanks again, Mrs. Cooper," Bernadette said, and after a quick tussle of both boys hair, she ran off.

The commotion woke the twins and they walked out of their rooms, bright eyed, but not particularly bushy tailed.

"Good morning my little sweethearts," Mary said. "Everybody to the sink to get some hands washed, then to the table to get some grace going." She pointed to the boys. "Although you two may have to send one up yourselves." The four little ones washed their hands in turn, and then took their seats at the table. Mary went to join them, but then paused, frozen. "Oh, phooey. I don't have any syrup," she said.

"We can't eat pancakes without syrup," Aditi confirmed.
"You are right about that," Mary said with a little chuckle. "Alrighty, we're going to go on a little field trip to the store down the way."

She herded the children up and off they went.

As she shut the door behind her, the phone rang. And rang. And rang. Without anyone to answer, the caller left a message.

"Hello. I am calling for Dr. Amy Fowler. I have some good news in regards to your position with Pasadena University. Please call back at your earliest convenience."

Hours after crawling back into bed at dawn, it was Amy's turn to wake up first. She rolled over towards Sheldon's side of the bed, half expecting him to be up and moving about. Instead, she found him sound asleep, balled up in the sheets as if he'd been sleeping fitfully. It made her curious, and she lay motionless, watching him silently and pondering what spiked activity inside his cranium had him in such a slumbering tizzy. Moments passed this way as Amy kept attentive vigil, and Sheldon—who was always so commanding and verbose when awake—looked so meek and innocent asleep. Amy smiled a little, thinking to herself how much he looked like his daughter in that moment. Sometimes, Amy would stumble upon the young girl, collapsed and asleep on the floor after having played too long and refusing to take her nap. At those times, with her body twisted and her eyes dotting behind her closed eyelids, Aditi looked as if she were fighting sleep even as her weary body clamored for rest.

Sheldon finally stirred a little, his head lifting slightly from the pillow and his body shifting beneath the sheets. His lips parted the slightest bit and he grunted something in his sleep, and Amy looked at him with renewed interest as he squirmed his way awake. His head moved a little, and then his mouth fell open into a feline yawn, followed by his free arm stretching out, begging for circulation. His eyes joined his body and his brain followed a moment later. He looked confused.

"Good morning, Sheldon," she whispered with her head against the pillow.

"Good morning, Amy," he said with a raspy voice. He rubbed his eye with the knuckles of his left hand.

"I enjoyed that," she said softly. "The meteor shower."

He just grunted back with a nod, his eyes fighting to remain open.

"What did you dream about?" Amy whispered.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It appears my eidetic memory is limited to the waking world."

"Then let me attempt to read your mind," she said.

"I hardly believe you can do that," he said.

"Cabbage."

The statement piqued his interest and she could see his focus rallying.

"You murmured that as you were coming awake," she said.

"Indeed," he said, realization dawning on his face. "I dreamt of a giant cabbage. A head of vegetation that chased me from my home and into the streets, pursuing me with a viciousness and
severity usually reserved for root plants—a rutabaga or turnip, perhaps.”

"Were you afraid?"

"I was terrified. I desperately ran for my life," Sheldon answered. He surveyed his surroundings. "I see my frantic escape brought me to this bed."

Amy smiled.

"And you?" he asked. "What did you dream about?"

"The children," she said.

"You miss them," he replied.

Amy nodded. "Do you?"

He nodded as well.

They looked at each other a while longer, and Sheldon lifted his head from the pillow, as if on the brink of getting out of bed. Amy spoke.

"You looked like Aditi just now," she said. "When you were asleep. You were all twisted up and cozy."

He dropped his head back to the pillow. "You always look like Robert," he said. "Or rather, he looks like you."

"Poor child," Amy said, and turned over to her back. "This face does not wear well on children." She turned her face to Sheldon. "I speak from personal experience."

"I believe you're mistaken," Sheldon said. "Your distinct features and dark complexion will serve him well."

She smiled a little. Then had a thought. "How do you think they are faring without us?"

"Well," Sheldon answered, "my mother is surely preparing their each and every meal to include the "three Bs": biscuits, butter and bacon fat."

"They might be taking advantage of the situation to watch inordinate amounts of television."

"They've surely eaten more sweets than they should."

"And told her all of our business."

"Which my mother will maintain in the highest confidence," Sheldon asserted.

Amy had her doubts. "They are probably somewhere running and jumping."

"Laughing and playing," he added.

"Tickling and being tickled."

"Hiding and being sought."

Amy sighed. "I wonder what they are doing right now."
Mary knew what affect an entire day indoors had on two rambunctious two-year-olds, and so after lunch, she took her ad-hoc daycare on a field trip to the park. She figured that the four children would be able to burn off some energy. Besides, all her efforts to get to the two camps into a harmonious play date had failed, and she was hoping a little fresh air and the playground would do the trick. En route, however, she saw the same paralyzing shyness out of her grandkids (that had characterized the morning) creeping into their outing to the park. While the boys skipped ahead, excited and hyper, the twins crouched behind her.

"Robert, don't you want to join the other little boys?" she urged him. "I think they might be playing tag and it looks mighty fun."

Robert replied by pouting his lips and shaking his head.

She turned to Aditi. "Now Aditi, I know you can talk. Cat caught your tongue?"

Aditi seemed disturbed by the metaphor, and remained bashful and silent.

Mary just shook her head and continued walking. The group soon was approaching a corner.

"Boys," she called after the Wolowitzes, as they were getting to far ahead. They stopped in their tracks, and turned around. "Now you two link arms and then we're going to look both ways before we cross the street."

The boys looked at her with minimal understanding.

"I said link arms, and—" she sighed, finally just catching up to them and manually linking their arms together. "LIKE THIS," she said more loudly. "NOW LOOK BOTH WAYS: THATAWAY," she said, turning to her right, "AND THEN THATAWAY," she said, looking to the right. She shook her head, and muttered under her breath. "And Sheldon thinks it's so great they're fooling with other languages. Is this what he wants?"

Aditi walked up, tugging on her grandmother's skirt. "Do they speak other languages?" she asked.

Mary noticed her granddaughter's shoe was untied and stopped down to tie it.

"They sure do, buttercup," she said.

Aditi stuck her tongue to the side, thinking deeply with a twinkle in her eye.

Sheldon and Amy had gotten ready for another day of lone activity. They talked of wiping baseboard and scrubbing floors, and Amy floated the idea of pulling up some weeds around the flower beds in the back. She hadn't gardened in years, and the day would be nice. After getting dressed, they made their way to the kitchen to scrounge up something to eat. As they entered the communal room, Sheldon was beginning a monolog on cometary evolution when Amy let out a tiny gasp. In response, Sheldon looked up, searching for what had startled her, and spotted a couple canoodling on the couch. The man was thin, gray-haired and—from what he could see her, much older than the woman. He didn't recognize either of them.

"Uncle Patch?" Amy said, stunned.

He turned around casually, but jumped up when he realized it was Amy. He spun around on the couch, and the young blonde, who'd been in his arms, fell back against the throw pillows. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" he replied.
"Participating in the marriage study," she said.

"So am I."

"Really? You're married?"

"Are you?" he said, defensively. He looked at Sheldon.

"I'm in the requisite 'committed, domicile relationship with a sexual component,'" Amy said, "thus qualifying me for the study."

"Well," he said, squirming in his seat, "so... am... I."

His "wife" spoke up, disgust in her voice. "Who is this woman?"

"And who is this man, Amy?" Sheldon asked pointedly.

The bickering relatives both launched into responses, speaking over each other. After a moment, Amy tried again.

"This, Sheldon, is my Uncle Patch. I would provide you with his real name, but I do not know what it is."

"And this, Kristen, is my niece, Amy," Uncle Patch said, directing his words (if not his glare) to his significant other. "Excuse her manners. My sister is a bit of a stuffed shirt, and raised her daughter to be the same damn way."

The comment stoked Amy's fire. "May I see you in the kitchen?" she said, then spun on her heels and marched out. Patch rose and followed behind her reluctantly.

"C'mon Amy," he said, a bit irreverently once they'd reached the kitchen. "I would have thought you would be excited to see your uncle."

"Under different circumstances, perhaps," Amy replied, "but, I've never seen that women in my life, and she looks suspiciously like all the other co-eds you've had a history of—what Aunt Bertha calls—'humping and dumping.'"

"Whoa," he said, taken aback, "strong language for a woman who found the Disney movie Tarzan 'overly-sexual."

"He had known Jane for scarcely a minute before he was looking up her skirt."

"Still, it's like you're taking this whole thing personally."

"Well, then excuse me, but as a scientist I find experimental fraud particularly repugnant. I defy you to look me in the eye and say you qualify for this study."

"Fine," Patch said with an exasperated sigh. "We've only been seeing each other for a few weeks, but she is a wonderful young lady and I want her to know how much she means to me."

Amy was unmoved.

"You need the money."

"It wouldn't hurt," he answered shamelessly.

Amy scoffed and walked off. He caught up to her, touching her on the shoulder. She stopped and
turned around.

"Look, Amy. I don't need a lot in life, but I'm getting up there and this money would help me pay off a few bills and give me some peace of mind. I don't want to buy anything fancy or anything, if that's what you're thinking." She didn't say anything. "I can count on you not to say anything, can't I?"

"Fine," she said, relenting, "but don't expect me to like it."

Amy marched back out, and found Sheldon and the woman conversing merrily.

"Despite her age," Sheldon said, "your aunt has some fascinating comments on Aztec human sacrifice. Did you know that she is an anthropology graduate student at UCLA?"

"She not my au—well I'm glad you all are getting along." She nodded to the woman cordially, in a show of good faith. "You'll have to excuse Sheldon and me," Amy said. "We haven't had breakfast."

Amy grabbed Sheldon's arm and he hurriedly stumbled off behind her.

Their first time around—their last time around—had ended so badly that, in the end, the scandal was its only legacy. So much so that in the intervening years all the individual moments had faded and, even for Lise-Marie, their entire relationship had been reduced to those final moments of anguish. Sitting there, however, in an outdoor café just a block down the street from where he lived, she found herself gazing, mesmerized, at his lips and other things started to come back to mind. Good things. Pleasant things. Things she'd forgotten. Like how passionate he could be when he talked about, what he once referred to as, "the human shark tank."

"I mean, listen," he continued, segueing into his final point, "even though thermoeconomics is couched in this liberal, heterodox language that's intimidating to traditional economists and conservative politicians, it has real implications to the essential field of ecological economics, which itself is related to the fields of sustainability and sustainable development. Lise, if that's where the future is headed," he paused, nodding assuredly and pinning her with a determined look, "then that's where the money is." He sighed, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "I can't be the only one who sees that."

She didn't respond to his query, exactly, just watched him another second, smiling a little. "I thought you'd forgotten all that," she said.

"Forgotten all what?" he said.

"Those vicious economic schemes and philosophies. The ones that—how was it?—'join man and beast and reward as victors those ballsy and crazy and smart enough to want it all.'"

"The human shark tank," he said.

She nodded.

He turned his head, pensive for a moment, and then looked back at her, his head tilted a bit to the side. "I haven't forgotten," he said, resignation in his voice. "It's just not a way of life anymore. Things change."

"I don't like change," she said flatly.
"Aw, sure you do," he said. He took a sip of water. "You've changed quite a bit. What have you been doing all these years?"

"I got my degree as a physicist. I work as a project administrator." She paused, debating if she should say more. "At Caltech." He nodded, a broad smile coming onto his face. She couldn't tell if it was one of happiness or ridicule. "Why do you look at me that way?" she asked.

"I'm proud of you. You did what you set out to do," he said. "I know it was hard to do what you did—to sacrifice your own ambitions to take up the torch for your sister. To tell you the truth, I didn't know if you would stick with it."

"You weren't alone in your doubt," she said, a bit sourly.

"It wasn't doubt," he said. "It was just a lot to commit to." He leaned forward on the table, crossing his arms. "I know how smart you were, Lise. How smart you are. Good for you."

She smiled, her defensiveness fading. "And you?" she asked. "What have you been up to?"

"Well, I'm back in the States," he said with a chuckle.

"I noticed," she said.

"I've been working as a freelance securities consultant. I've had a couple gigs with the FBI, IBM, Cisco. But really, the small guys pay the bills: the local police, an accounting firm here and there. A bakery once."

She laughed at that. "Someone was stealing recipes?"

"Yes, actually." Even he saw the humor in that, and turned his head, chuckling a little.

"Wow. Sounds like important work. Honestly, I'm not being sarcastic."

"It's not as prestigious as it sounds. The work isn't steady, but I like it. It leaves me time." He paused. "Freedom."

"Freedom to do what?"

He thought a moment before answering. "To live."

She nodded. Just then, someone called out "Antoinette!" from the counter. Lise-Marie rose to collect their food. When she got back to the table, Ian looked her quizzically.

"Why did you use an alias?" he asked. He took his fish tacos from the tray.

"It isn't an 'alias,'" she said, spraying her vegan salad with lime juice. "It's a user name. Like online."

"But we aren't online," he said, pointing out the obvious.

She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

He didn't answer, but went on eating and she did too. They ate in silence for several minutes. It was growing warmer as the sun had shifted and they were no longer in the shade.

"In this your first time in Monterey?" he asked.
She nodded.

"Then we should definitely visit the aquarium before you leave," he said. "It's one of the best in the nation. You won't believe it, but they have a literal shark tank. With the season's pass…"

As he continued to speak, Lise-Marie turned to her left and saw a cop car parked across the street. She could just make out an officer sitting in the driver's seat, but couldn't see where he was looking. She pulled down her ever-present shades to just below her eyes, peering out over them.

"What is it?" Ian asked, looking in the direction that had captured her attention.

"Do policemen always park out here?" she asked.

Ian didn't seem to have an answer. "Not really. I don't believe so. This area is pretty safe. Although, I did hear that a house out here got burglarized a couple weeks ago. I think they're still looking for the guy." He turned his attention back to his tacos. Lise-Marie became fretful.

"I am feeling hot all of sudden," she said, rubbing her neck.

Ian looked at her, incredulous. "It can't be more than 80 degrees out here."

"I am from Switzerland," she countered. "I might as well be sitting on the sun."

Ian looked around. "Well, we can change tables—"

"I would like to go home," she said, getting her purse and rising.

"Seriously?" he said, still seated. "We just started eating,"

"I'm done. I eat like a bird," she said. He just stared back at her. "Let's go," she insisted.

"Fine," he said, taking a humongous final bite from his taco. He followed behind her as she walked off.

In the last six hours, Sheldon and Amy's fixer-upper hideout and getaway had gradually faded into a high-traffic love shack. Every couple of hours, a knock at the door or ring of the bell had meant another couple was joining them on what was becoming the promised "couple's retreat." Now, totaling five couples, the chatter around the cabin revealed that everyone was foggy on the details of the endeavor: one couple thought they would have to win the money, another thought it was a one-day affair, and one couple even thought sex coaching would be included in the "instruction." The whole kit and caboodle was gathered in the communal area while Sheldon crouched in the corner.

"You're as bad as the twins," Amy said, making the connection for the first time.

"You mean as good as the twins," he said. "They really may be on to something, Amy."

Rising from the chatter, however, was one common theme that was on everyone's mind: Where the hell was Dr. Singh?

The sun was on its way down when there was one final ring of the doorbell. Storming to the door, Sheldon boiled inside at the idea of another couple arriving. Instead, at 5 foot 2 inches and a hundred pounds soaking wet, stood a young woman wearing a solid color T-shirt, summery skirt and floral-print flats, and bearing a computer tablet and clipboard. No one knew who she was, and Sheldon took it upon himself to find out.
"Who are you?" he asked.

"Kayla Morrison," she said, her tone friendly but firm, "I am a third year graduate student at San Diego University, and I'm one of Dr. Singh's—"

"I'm so glad you brought him up," Sheldon interrupted, crossing his arms. "Where is Dr. Singh?"

"I wasn't done," Kayla said. "As I was saying, I am a graduate student with his research—"

"WHERE IS HE?" Sheldon demanded, looming over the petite women crouching under him.

"Take one step back," she said sternly. Sheldon did so. "Now, Dr. Singh is otherwise preoccupied with matters concerning his eminent retirement; however he has sent me in his stead. I'm sure I can help you with any inquiries you may have."

"Then why isn't any beer in the fridge?" a rotund, ruddy man from Portland named Richard asked.

"And what is the point of that little green thingy hanging in the shower?" Thom added. He seemed sincerely disturbed.

"And, most importantly," Midori said, pulling a book from her face, "when are we going to get our checks?"

"Yeah!" Patch joined in. "I was promised a handsome sum for my services, and I'm not leaving until I get it."

"How handsome?" Amy asked, leaning into his ear.

"I dunno. A thousand bucks?"

She smirked to herself. She'd best not say what she and Sheldon's piece of the pie was.

The frenzied crowd was quickly turning into a mob, and despite having two intellectual heavyweights in their midst, the IQ of a mob remains that of its least intelligent member. Considering that Kayla had seen one gentleman sitting in the corner, smelling the bottom of his shoe, she saw the need to intervene—and quickly.

"May I ask everyone to calm down?" she said, her loud and her authoritative posture overcoming her short stature. "If we may, let's begin with our first exercise." She walked past Sheldon and further into the room.

The group followed her with his eyes. They had quieted down but were short of cooperative. Kayla tried at different tack.

"Based on the participant profiles, I believe you're Dr. Cooper," she said nodding at Sheldon.

"I am."

"And you," Kayla said, turning to Amy, "are Dr. Fowler."

"I am," Amy said.

"You two are researchers, I am told."

They looked at each other, somewhat apprehensively. "We are," they replied.
Kayla nodded her affirmation, and began arranging the stray chairs into two even rows.

Amy took a step forward. "Is that relevant?" she asked.

"Well," Kayla began, staring curiously at a stain in one seat, "you are perfect candidates in helping me with our exercise. I would welcome your assistance."

"What is the nature of this 'exercise'?" Sheldon asked.

Kayla stood erect, clutching her tablet and clipboard against her chest. "It is a conjugal anamnesis activity designed to systematically ascertain, record, and assess psychogenic intimacy through a series of inquiries predicated on communal experience."

"So then, you're referring to the Newlywed Game?" Amy asked.

Kayla cleared her throat. "Yes," she said, muttering. "The Newlywed Game." She motioned towards the seats. "Males on one side, females on the other." She checked her clipboard. "Thom and Marc—pick sides as you wish."

After a moment of indecision, everyone sat down.

Ian gently ran his hand down the banister, creeping as he moved down the stairs and past where Lise-Marie was slumbering on the couch. He'd awoken inexplicably with a ferocious thirst, and was inching towards the kitchen to quench it. All was dark, and he closed his eyes, visualizing his way through his home. Finally reaching the fridge, he opened the door, pushing in the automatic light switch with one finger, and grabbing a can of ginger ale with the other. He would wait until he was back in his room to open it, lest the hissing sound of the gas escaping from the can wake his guest. He had just crossed the threshold between the kitchen and the dining room when he was startled by the sound of a crash, followed by the swooshing noise of papers cascading to the floor.

"Merde," he heard from several feet away. He recognized it as French, but it sounded like it was coming from the dining room table and not from the couch. He groped in the dark, rubbing his hand up and down the cool wall until he found the light switch. When he did, he turned on the light, only to see Lise-Marie scrambling to gather papers from off the floor and stuffing them into one of Ian's paper portfolios he used to keep all of his important paperwork. She looked up, shock written on her face.

"Ian," she said, breathless and stunned.

He didn't reply.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Raisin Bran can be a controversial cereal.

Lise-Marie sat frozen in terror, her hand caught in the proverbial cookie jar, with Ian's private papers all around her. He looked at her, stunned and displeased, and she dreaded the moments to come.

"Care to explain?" he asked calmly, his hand still on the light switch.

"It is not how it looks," she said, sitting up.

"How does it look?" he asked, lowering his arm to his side.

She stared at him for several moments, unable to answer. It occurred to her that no matter what she said, she would never be able to explain herself. She placed the papers and the portfolio on the table. "I'll just leave," she said, dropping her gaze as her hair fell over her face. She rose, making her way towards the living room; he blocked her path.

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me why you're here," he said, sternly.

"I told you," she said, almost pleading. "I'm on vacation. I needed some time aw—"

"BULLSHIT!" he yelled back. "You're hiding something and I want to know what it is."

She stared back at him blankly, both of her lips pulled into her mouth and her face the picture of panic and guilt.

Ian just shook his head. "You think I didn't notice? How you don't want to leave the house? When you do, you're always wearing those ridiculous sunglasses everywhere. Your phone hasn't rung once since you've been here, Lise-Marie. Not once."

"I told you I do not have many friends here in America," she protested.

"Right. So I guess that also explains your harried escape from the restaurant earlier?"

She said nothing.

"Answer me," he demanded.

It was the moment she'd been waiting for, the moment she'd rehearsed on the train all the way up the Coast, practiced in the taxi in the city, and mumbled to herself on the walk up to his house. Once she'd arrived, however, he'd been so much more gracious than she'd ever expected. More welcoming. Less suspicious. Now, the words that used to flow so easily felt bitter in her mouth. Bitter and wrong. Even so, the truth felt even less like an option. The truth felt more like a luxury she couldn't afford.

That he couldn't afford either.
"You're right," she said, forcing the words from her mouth. "I am hiding."

The first bit of confession seemed to calm him some. "From what?"

"I'm hiding from... a man," she began, and could feel something sticky and hot and burning come over her. "I ran away from my boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend?" he repeated.

She nodded. She took a step back from where they had been standing, his posture intimidatingly close. She looked down, fidgeting with her hands. "He was beastly to me. Cruel and savage in every way. Finally, I'd had enough. I left suddenly, without telling anyone. I thought of you and came here."

She saw something in his face shift, and his countenance softened some. However, he still had questions. "What does that have to do with you snooping through my private things?" he asked.

"I saw a paper, a piece of mail that fell to the floor from the table by the door." That much was true. "It was from a parole officer, and I panicked. I thought I had run from one bad situation into a worse one."

"You saw that?" he asked, his face sinking.

She nodded her head. "It doesn't matter," she said. "You are not like him. You have shown that to me. I should not have doubted you."

Dropping his foreboding stance, he backed away and then moved over to the couch, taking a seat. After a moment of consideration, she followed him, taking a seat next to him.

"What I did was wrong," she said. "I never meant to violate your privacy. I am very sorry."

He turned to her. "I'm sorry, too. I guess I haven't been totally honest with you either." He took a deep breath and looked down, rubbing his hands together. "I didn't leave all those years ago because I had gotten a job in America. I left because I was extradited on charges of insider trading and fraud. Upon returning home, I was tried and sentenced to ten years in prison. I only served three, and I've been on probation ever since." He turned away, shame on his face. "That's the paper you saw."

The news, however, left Lise-Marie in a stupor. It gave her entirely new insight on their fateful last night, as well as the many tear-stained nights that followed. She wished she'd known then what she was only learning now.

Not that she even deserved the truth.

"I'd always thought that you just..." Her voice trailed off.

"I know," he said, guiltily. He placed a hand on her back. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry this... guy hurt you. You deserve better."

She didn't say anything, and after several moments passed, she looked over at her things. Reaching down and past Ian, she pulled her larger tote bag towards herself, dragging it across the floor. She bent low, unzipping it. Ian grabbed her hand, stopping her.

"Don't," he said.
She looked up at him, just over her shoulder. She sat back up, her back settling into the cushions, and their elbows and shoulders brushed against each other; their eyes met in something mutually perceptive. He wasn't angry anymore; he wasn't even hurt. Maybe she had won back his trust, and if the warmth in his eyes—that were just inches from her own—meant anything, she might have even won back a bit of his affection. It was a thought that filled her with profound gratitude… and remorse. She wanted so badly for her lies to be true; she almost wished that she could will them to be so.

But they weren't true, and the best she could aspire for was to be gone from here before the other shoe dropped. She hadn't even noticed that they were inching towards each other; they were practically nose-to-nose. She felt her lips fall apart ever so slightly.

"Stay as long as you want," he said, faintly.

"Thank you," she whispered back.

He nodded back. "You're welcome," he said. Then, after a big gulp, he rose and walked off, and went back upstairs.

Thom and Marc sat in their chairs, back to back, while just a couple seats further down Patch sat back to back against his fake wife, Kristen. Amy stood nearby on the "Female plus Thom" side, while Sheldon stood hovering on the "Male" side. The other two couples watched tensely from the couch. Kayla stood, leaning in the corner, clearly frustrated, her eyes closed and her hand gripping her forehead.

"Couples," Amy announced, her voice low and dripping with anticipation, "we have reached the sudden death round of our competition."

"I'm going to say this one more time," Kayla said. "This is not a competition."

"Shhh," someone said from the peanut gallery. "I have money on Marc."

"For the sake of clarification," Sheldon said, "and in the off chance you are not a fan of daytime television game shows or a participant of organized sporting contests—a 'sudden death round' refers to a form of competition whereby play ends as soon as one competitor is ahead of the others, with that competitor triumphing, usually in the case of a tie."

"We know what sudden death is," Thom said.

Sheldon turned to him. "So then you are a fan of daytime game shows?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, surely you engage in organized sports?"

"Uh, double no."

"Then how are you so familiar with a 'sudden death round'?"

"Maybe because I don't live under a rock."

"Well, that's a curious thing to say," Sheldon said. "Of course you don't live under a rock. A rock is a completely unsuitable place of dwelling. Besides its insufficient size—"

Amy cut in. "I hate to interrupt, Sheldon," she said, "but we must move forward."
He nodded in concession.

Her voice resumed its dramatic tone. "Marc and Thom, Patch and Kristen—only one question separates you from victory."

"Can we get on with it already?" Kristen said.

"Fine," Amy said. She cleared her throat. "What is your mate's mother's middle name?"

All eyes were fixed on the two dueling couples as they wracked their brains. Amy nodded at Sheldon and he began to sing the countdown music, a ditty that sounded like the theme song of Final Jeopardy. When he was somewhere near the last of the "doo doo doos," the four remaining players scribbled away on their white boards.

"Markers down!" Amy announced. The contestants complied. "Thom, you may go first."

"Bertha," he said while lifting his white board.

All eyes went to Marc.

He lifted his white board as well. It said… "Bertha".

"Correct," Amy said. Marc and Thom leaned into each other, sharing a quick kiss.

"And now Patch, what is your mate's mother's middle name?"

Patch cleared his throat. "You know, my penmanship hasn't been that great every since that minor stroke I had a couple years back."

"What is on your white board?" Amy asked pointedly.

He lifted it. It was empty.

Immediately, Thom and Marc jumped up, rejoicing, and threw their arms around each other. Applause and loud celebration broke out in the room, dotted by the occasional "boo." Patch leaned in close to Kristen.

"Hey, I did better than most guys," he whispered in her ear. "Not bad for two weeks." She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

"Now hold on just one minute," Sheldon said, looking at Amy. "We never saw what was on your aunt's board."

"She's not my—" Amy began, but stopped when she caught Patch's eye. "Sheldon, it doesn't matter. If she put down anything at all, which she surely did, they lost."

"Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps her mother doesn't have a middle name, in which case, she would be in good company. An estimated 20 percent of people don't, at least in the English-speaking world."

"Please," Amy said, motioning to Kristen. "Lift your white board."

Kristen did so. It read "Clarisse."

Instantly the party erupted again, with whoops and hollers and elated embracing between Marc and Thom.
"I didn't think we'd actually win," Thom said breathlessly.

"Me neither," Marc said, with a wistful sigh. "I mean, I thought we might, but there is a huge difference between thinking you might do it and actually doing it."

"This is not a competition," Kayla muttered under her breath.

"Now hold on just one minute," Sheldon said, even louder than the first time. The room fell silent and all eyes turned to him. "This contest was for second place. Amy and I actually won."

"Yeah, whatever," Marc said and turned back to adoring Thom. "We won second place."

"You cannot win second place," Sheldon said. "You can earn second place. You can manage second place. You can come in second place. You cannot win second place."

"Oh, god, you sound like Amy," Patch said.

"Thank you," Sheldon said, sincerely.

"It's not meant as a compliment," Patch said.

"Then what is it meant as?" Amy said defensively.

"It means you always sound so hoity-toity about everything, but you ain't foolin' anybody. It's obvious you and Beanstalk cheated."

Sheldon recoiled, aghast at the accusation. "Are you seriously suggesting that we engaged in fraud?"

"Of course you did," Kristen piped up. "You think I seriously believe that you know off the top of your head her favorite book in elementary school?"

"Or the name of her first boyfriend?" Patch added.

"Or your anniversary." That contribution came from Charles, who was sitting on the couch. "I mean, who knows this stuff?" He snorted. "I mean, come on. Am I right?" He scanned the crowd. No one responded. His wife hit him in the head.

"The point is," Patch continued, "you two were up to some funny business."

"Oh yeah?!" Amy blurted. "Well you and Kristen aren't even married!"

"Well actually," Kayla said, "none of the participants are legally wed, but—"

"They met two weeks ago," Amy said.

Kayla gasped, her head turning to Patch. "Is this true?"

"Oh, don't even put this back on me," Patch said, rising and leading with his finger. "She's just trying to distract us from the fact she cheated."

"Amy and I have no need to cheat," Sheldon said.

"How would we even do so?" Amy asked.

"You could have texted each other," Marc said.
"No service," Amy responded.

"Or maybe they used Morse code," Midori suggested.

"I'm ex-military," Charles said. "I would have heard that."

"Well, you're a couple of brainiacs. I'm sure you could figure out a way to do it," Patch said.

"For the final time," Sheldon said, increasingly more upset. "We did not cheat."

"Then how else do you explain a perfect score, when the next two couples were tied with only six correct answers?" Thom asked.

"We engage in regular communication and spend sufficient time together that we know each other very well and are familiar with the major events of each other's lives."

"Yeah, like the color of her favorite bra? Who even has a favorite bra?" said Anna from the couch. It was then apparent that she wasn't wearing one at all.

"One day she was standing in front of the mirror and remarked that she was wearing her favorite bra. I happened to note the color," Sheldon said.

"Which was a question that shows orientation bias, by the way," Marc announced.

"Oh here we go again," Richard said. He was a middle-aged gentleman who only got one question right.

"You know what, I'm sick of your homophobic sneers, Dick," Thom replied.

"Stop calling me, Dick," he said. "My name is Richard."

"My name is Richard," Anna mimicked from the couch.

"Seriously, Anna?" Richard said. "You're mocking me now?"

"You got one question right, Richard. It's a wonder you even recognize me at all."

"Do you even recognize yourself? You know full well our favorite cereal is Raisin Bran."

"Raisin Bran? I hate that cereal. You like Raisin Bran. It's the cure for people who have a stick stuck up their asses."

"I like Raisin Bran," Midori, said, throwing her hat into the ring. "I like the high fiber content coupled with the hint of sweetness from the raisins."

"Agreed," Sheldon said.

"Oh, just shove it, both of you," Anna said.

"Don't talk to my wife like that," Dave said.

"And don't talk to my wife like that!" Richard yelled.

"Oh yeah? Or what?" Dave asked, rising.

"Or I might show you what 10 years of eating Raisin Bran for breakfast can do for you upper body strength."
"Who cares?" Dave said. "You're still a fat ass."

"THAT'S IT!" Richard yelled, and the two men started pushing each other, crashing into the sofa where Midori, Charles and Anna scrambled to get out of the way.

"Beat that dick! Beat that dick!" Thom and Marc start chanting through hearty laughter.

The room descended into chaos, with "husbands" and "wives" caught in verbal, physical and follicular sparring.

Sheldon inched over to Amy. "Let's get out of here," he whispered in her ear.

"Let's," Amy agreed, and they hurried off to their bedroom.

They could hear a loud crash and Kayla screaming over the mayhem as they shut the door.

Mary awoke to the sound of giggling. Decades had passed since her children were young, but she still was a light sleeper. She threw the covers off of herself and walked out to the children's room. She'd felt a little thrill when she saw the twins finally opening up some at the park, but she wasn't satisfied. She'd felt it was a triumph when she convinced Bernadette to let the boys spend the night. However, she'd been very clear with the boys that they were to remain in the living room overnight. It seemed like they hadn't gotten the point. She opened the bedroom door and was stunned to see it empty. Yet, the sound of giggling continued. She made her way down the hallway and out into the living room, and that's where she found them. At least she thought she did.

The coffee table and the couch covered in a large sheet and a small glow of light was emanating from underneath.

"If they are under there playing doctor I am not accountable for my actions," she whispered to herself. Mary dropped to the floor, lifted a corner of the sheet and peered in. All four children were crouched around a flashlight and a large book.

"Grandma!" Aditi cried at the sight of Mary. "We're playing camping!"

"And whose idea was that?" she asked. They all turned to Robert. "So you are the mastermind behind this little expedition?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders. "We haven't gone anywhere."

"Well, you're not in the bed," she said.

"But it's still not an expedition," he said.

Mary was about to respond when she saw Joel taking a bite from what looked like a small sandwich. She took a sniff at the air. "What's that burning smell?"

"Robert found out how to make s'mores with a candle," Aditi said proudly. "And they are mmm, mmm good!"

Mary backed out of the blanket and looked towards the kitchen, and let out a loud shriek. The aforementioned "candle" turned out to be a Bunsen burner—and it was still lit. She hadn't seen one of those things since Sheldon was about Robert's age, and there was a burn mark on Meemaw's china serving tray to prove it. To avoid a repeat performance, she ran over and turned it off. Her alarm drew the kids from out of their "tent."
"Robert!" she said, her hand over her heart. "You could have burnt the house down!"

He shook his head.

"And why not?" she asked.

"Because this isn't a house. It's an apartment."

"You know what I meant," she said. She shook her head, muttering. "Sounds more like Sheldon Cooper every day."

"Come play with us!" Aditi said cheerily. She started jumping up and down, and the boys followed suit, hopping with glee. Finally ducking down, Aditi grabbed the sheet and pulled it back over their heads. Mary sighed deeply and then walked back over to the makeshift tent, joining them.

"What you got going on under here?" she asked, on all fours.

"Telling stories to the boys," Robert said, biting down on another s'more.

"Stories," the boys repeated excitedly, throwing their arms in the air.

"Well, they better not be ghost stories," Mary admonished. "Those are from the Devil."

"What's the Devil?" Aditi asked.

Robert scrunched up his face, drawing it into a snarly scowl, and bared his fingers into the shape of talons. "A mythical creature from Middle-Eastern origin that makes people do bad things," he growled. "I read about it in my Book of Legends."

His enthusiasm disturbed Mary. "He's a monster, alright," she said, "the biggest monster of all, except he's real."

Aditi leaned in towards Robert. "I told you monsters were real."

Mary lifted the book that was sitting on the floor. "What's this?"

"You and I Count to 20," Aditi answered. "Daddy made it."

Mary hadn't seen the book in years, but recognized it as the very one Sheldon had written years ago when the twins were just infants. Warm memories came flooding back to her. "Hop up here on your Grandma's lap and lemme hear you read to me," she said, patting her knee.

Aditi complied enthusiastically, and snuggled into her grandmother's waiting arms. The boys crowded in around her. Aditi pointed to the picture on the cover. "That's me and Robert!" she said, while looking back at her grandmother. Mary squinted at the illustration.

"Well, I imagine it is," she said. With a nod, Aditi opened the book across her lap.

"One. There is one electron, neu-neu-neu—"

"Neutron," Robert said.

"I know," Aditi said, and then resumed reading. "There is one electron and neutron and pro...ton in a hy...drogen atom. Two. There are two hydrogen atoms in a mo-mo-mo—"

"I KNOW THAT!" Aditi said.

"Let her figure it out on her own," Mary said calmly. "Keep reading, baby."

"There are two hydrogen atoms in a molecule of water."

Mary cleared her throat. "Good Lord, Shelly," she said. "Could you make it any harder for the kiddies?" Aditi looked at her grandmother with some confusion.

"I'm Aditi," she said.

"I know, sweetie. Just keep reading," Mary said. She picked up a s'more from the plate on the floor and took a bite.

"This is good," she said.

"I told you," Aditi said. She went back to the book and turned the page.

"Well that was a very disturbing turn of events," Sheldon said. He stood by the door, as Amy took a seat on the edge of the bed. "A bunch of complete strangers working themselves into hysteria, humiliated by their own deficiencies, and accusing us of dishonesty. It's appalling."

Amy nodded. "It is. However, the pandemonium that ensued attests to their lack of judgment."

"Indeed," Sheldon said. He paused, staring into the mirror and rubbing his fingers through the hair on his temples. "Recently I have found a small number of gray hairs in my sideburns, Amy. Would you be so kind as to lend me your tweezers?"

She rose from the bed, unzipped her toiletry bag, and pulled out a pair of tweezers, handing them to him. Then she returned to where she had been sitting, watching Sheldon preen himself in the mirror.

"I didn't even realize you had any gray hairs," she said.

"That's because I pick them out. Only two or three, here and there."

"I guess even the most communicative couples have their secrets," she said.

"Speaking of which," Sheldon said, still gazing in the mirror, "the night of the party. Where did you get that dress from? I don't recall ever seeing it before."

Amy thought about the story she and Penny had rehearsed; the one about the soap opera.

"Penny bought it for me," she answered, "as a gift."

"Penny?" Sheldon said, surprised.

Amy nodded. "She used Leonard's credit card."

Sheldon spun around, truly alarmed. "Leonard's credit card! How much did it cost?"

"I don't know exactly," she said. "It retailed for about $150, but it was on sale. Penny has a rapport with the shop girl and so got an additional discount."

"Well, then we'll just have to pay them a gift in kind." He thought a minute, and then smiled
broadly. "Ooh! I know. How about one of those nursing bras that help with chafed nipples? You liked that while you were breastfeeding the twins."

"We don't have to pay them back, Sheldon."

"Yes we do. As you well know, I am a strong follower of gift reciprocity. Keeps things simple that way."

"Historically, it hasn't, actually."

"I still think it's the preferable course of action."

"Sheldon," she continued, "sometimes people who love you sense a need and fill it because they want to, without expecting anything in return."

"Well, how in the world can you 'sense' a need in someone else without the person communicating to you exactly what it is they require?"

"It's not difficult, Sheldon," she said. She looked away, pensive. "To sense the needs of another, one just needs to be empathetic, observant, discerning… perceptive."

"Hm," he said with a shrug. "I imagine so, but it all sounds like a bunch of voodoo to me."

"It's not voodoo. Sometimes a person wants to be pleasantly surprised, or… I don't know. There is a joy that comes from knowing that someone is invested in you enough to know how you feel or what you think without having to spell it out explicitly."

"Well," Sheldon said in response, "in contrast to you, I make no claims to be a mind reader."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

Sheldon looked at her in the mirror. "Well, I often carry the suspicion that you feel a certain way, but are acting in a completely opposite fashion. If I am being completely honest, I find such vagueness rather baffling." He gave himself one more gander, then walked over to Amy, handing her the tweezers.

"I imagine I can be guilty of that on occasion," she said, reflectively.

"I think you may be guilty of such right now."

"Fine then," Amy said. "Since we're here, I think we should take advantage of this opportunity to talk about some things."

"Oh," Sheldon said, regretfully. "I didn't mean we had to remedy the situation this moment."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Amy, you know how much I loathe psychobabble."

"What I know is that you like the unedited ramblings of Beverly Hofstadter. I don't know anyone who is more consumed with near perpetual, uninvited psychoanalysis."

"Yes," he agreed, "but it usually isn't about me."

"Sheldon," Amy said, nearly pleading.
He took a seat next to her on the bed. "Then what is it that you want to talk about?" He braced himself for any number of likely topics: the house, her job prospects, the children's educational concerns… Lise Marie.

It took Amy a while to say anything, her line of sight vacillating between Sheldon's waiting face and the rug on the floor. She finally spoke softly. "Do you desire me?"

The question seemed deceptively easy to answer. "Of course, Amy," Sheldon answered without pausing. "I think it is abundantly evident that I want to be with you."

"I know you want me," she clarified, "but do you desire me?"

He looked at her incredulously. "Amy, the two terms are synonyms."

"They aren't," she replied. "For example, if I accompany Penny to the bakery to satisfy one of her cravings for a cupcake and she turns to me and says, 'Want one?' I may very well accept simply because it is being offered. However, if I am sitting at home, in the throes of cooking, cleaning, attending to sick children and bills and job hunting, I may suddenly imagine before me a Bavarian cream cupcake with butter cream frosting, moist and succulent, tantalizing my taste buds. The image may be so vivid that I can all but see the treat there before me. Even if I never have the opportunity to get one, in that moment, a cupcake in all that I desire."

"Does this somehow relate to me?" he asked.

"I ask you again," she said. "Do you desire me?"

Sheldon sat a moment, contemplating Amy's wistful face. "Do I fail to please you sexually?"

"Well, I must confess that within you is a very passionate, caring and selfless lover."

"I suspected as much, although confirmation of the fact comes as a relief."

"But," Amy continued.

"The inevitable 'but,'" he murmured.

"But, you have come to only associate sexual activity with moments of intensity in our relationship, confining it to occasions when we are emotionally charged, perhaps after spending time apart, having an deep connection, or a enjoying a dedicated romantic evening."

"Okay," he said flatly, clearly seeing nothing wrong with that.

"You don't, however, seem to understand that sex can be an expression of connection at other times too," she placed her hand on his knee. "It can be spontaneous and capricious—borne of nothing more than unjustified desire. To compare it to physical hunger, we don't only eat when we are ravenous; we also eat for comfort, to celebrate, to try a new recipe or just to pass the time."

"Which is no doubt a major contributing factor to the obesity epidemic in this country."

"Regardless, considering you cognitive abilities, I'm sure you are having no problem correlating that metaphor to the topic at hand."

Sheldon looked skeptical, and a bit defensive. "So, I guess you are suggesting we should just engage in spontaneous acts of random coitus like two bunnies in heat."

"I wouldn't dare even hope for that," Amy said.
Sheldon wasn't amused.

"For example," Amy said casually, "let's have sex right now."

Sheldon looked stunned. "Right now?"


He looked away pensively, seriously contemplating it, but coming up short. "Are you teasing me?"

"Not at all. Here." She took his hands, pulling him forward, and started to kiss him.

He wasn't really… responding.

"Kiss me back, Sheldon," she said against his mouth.

So he did. He puckered his lips and, after a few mechanical moments, his kiss began to feel familiar to something more earnest. He pulled away, shifting his position to something more comfortable and then began again. His effort was heartening.

Amy put her hands around his neck, massaging it as they went at it. She pulled up, rubbing her body against his. Then she pulled away from his mouth, kissing around his chin, neck, ear, anywhere her lips would lead her.

He was rallying some, but she didn't have him, not completely. She lowered her hand to somewhere much lower than his belt, hoping to stir something in him that would get his motor running. After several minutes of kissing and touching and panting and valiant effort, she pulled away, just a little, and found…

She found herself staring at someone with a red face and not much more. She couldn't hide her disappointment and dug her elbow into her knee, burrowing her face in the palm of her hand. Sheldon seemed to deflate at her downheartedness.

He looked down, truly saddened. His voice was small. "I may not be the man you need me to be, Amy."

The statement brought her to the verge of tears. She felt almost as bad for him as she did for herself. He was likely doing his best… but it just wasn't good enough. She turned away, staring at the wall.

He reached for a towel that was on the bed. "I am going to bathe for the evening," he announced.

Amy didn't say anything.

After another moment, he alighted from the bed. Amy watched as he grabbed a robe and disappeared behind the door. It reminded her of the days before they were together, when she was still with Virgil. He would work hours in the restaurant that were so long and demanding that he would stumble home and collapse into bed, all but dead. Back then, she had gotten accustomed to taking care of herself. But this relationship she had with Sheldon felt so much more fulfilling, more enduring, more… everything than that one. She wanted intimacy. She wanted intimacy with Sheldon. And she was going to get it.

She walked over and grabbed a robe, put it on, and followed him to the restroom. She knocked once on the door as a warning, and then walked right in, locking the door behind her.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Penny has a craving for Mike and Ike's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amy had snuck in the bathroom after Sheldon as he took his shower, and Sheldon heard her enter over the din of the water.

“If you perform what is commonly referred to as ‘number one’…” he began in the opening of a speech she had heard before. “…I ask that you refrain from flushing the toilet until after I have completed my shower.” She removed her robe and hung it on the back of the door. “However, if you—”

Amy pulled back the curtain, revealing her body, completely nude except for her panties and the shower slippers Sheldon insisted that they both wear during their stay. Wet from head to toe, and his hair slick with water, his face was the picture of shock.

“Hello,” she said.

“Amy?” was all he could formulate to say. She paused a moment; she knew that with Sheldon, pacing was everything. “What are you doing here?”

She was calm, but firm. “We’re not finished,” she said.

Sheldon looked around, struggling to make sense of his current situation. “And you want to finish here?”

She nodded.

“But the others might hear.”

“A risk that will only make our dalliance more tantalizing.”

She put one foot into the shower, and then the other, and pulled the curtain shut behind her. Then she got closer until she was right under him, only centimeters between their bodies.

“Sheldon,” she said, the words coming to her, “you are the man I need you to be. You always have been and you always will be.” Holding on-to the railing on the wall, she drew herself up closer to his body, and he looked down at her with anticipation. Closing her eyes, she brushed her lips on the underside of his neck… then his chin… then his lips. Opening her eyes, she turned her face back up at him; she could already see Sheldon relenting a bit. “Kiss me,” she said.

He looked down at her and, with his mind seeming to come into focus, he lowered his head to hers, tentatively tapping her lips at first, but then beginning to really kiss her back; unlike before, she could feel the first hints of hunger on his lips. He started to ease up after a moment, but she took his chin in her hand and held him there, and he began pressing harder (pressing deeper) as they
both got more lost in the moment. She could feel the water making her wetter and wetter; droplets from the showerhead rained down on her, while tiny rivers of moisture coursed down Sheldon’s body and down to hers. She continued clinging to the side rail with one hand, and moved her other hand to his chest, digging her fingers into his soapy flesh. As if by magic, Sheldon’s hands began to rise as well, and one landed on her hip while the other hovered lightly over her breast. As the kissing intensified, so did his grip.

In the hand on her hip, he was also clutching a rag. Without breaking lip lock, she reached down and took the rag from his hand. She pulled away.

She looked at him, drenched and panting, with an intensity that hypnotized him.

“Tell me you desire me, Sheldon,” she said, staring him dead in the eye.

Three hard breaths and he echoed her words. “I desire you,” he said.

“Tell me you need me,” she said, leaning on the word “need.”

He was breathing through his mouth, his eyes were heavy and his bottom jaw trembled as he answered. “I need you.”

“Tell me you love me,” and her voice cut out a little, pleading, when she said “love.”

He nodded faintly, sniffing a little the water that was dripping into his nose. “I love you, Amy,” he said, “I love you very much.”

She smiled a little, and then she reached forward, pulling the soapy rag that was still in his hand. “Let me,” she said, pushing both of his hands down. She began to move the soapy towel up and down and then back and forth across his torso. He watched her, silently entranced as she worked, following her hands with hypnotic devotion. She gave special attention to his nipples, leaving iridescent bubbles all over his chest and abdomen. A shiver ran through his body and then she stopped; she noticed that his nipples weren’t the only parts that were coming to attention. He looked in her eyes, waiting dutifully for her next move.

She dropped the rag to the floor, and after a moment of hesitation, she reached over quickly, taking him into her hand. He sucked in sharply, his mouth falling open. She froze, didn’t move, and she looked up at him trying to reassure him silently with her eyes. He inhaled deeply, and then slowly exhaled, draining the air from his lungs as well as the tension and reluctance and uncertainty from his body. His eyes fell shut and the barest tip of his tongue peeked out of his mouth, tracing the outline of his damp lips.

She had him.

Starting slowly, she began to caress him in her hand, gradually increasing the speed and pressure of her touch. With each motion, he was more taken with pleasure, and he started writhing in her palm. Without missing a beat, she took his hand and gently slipped it in between her legs and under the wet silk of her panties, hoping beyond hope that he would rise to the occasion and discern what to do. Her efforts were rewarded when one finger, then two, began moving in delicate circles, teasing the swollen flesh below. A third finger soon followed, and apparently reaching from the depths of his most primal instincts, Sheldon worked her folds and crevices until he and they had reached some silent accord, working in sensual time. Her breath quickened, and her body tensed and ached with heightening gratification. Aroused to distraction, her hand fell from Sheldon and hovered aimlessly mid-air. This triggered Sheldon to stop as well. Panting, she tugged off her panties, leaving them to join the rag on the bathtub floor, and slipped behind him,
getting closer to the wall. Naturally, he turned around, and she placed a hand on each of his shoulders, bracing herself as she pushed herself up and placed a foot on each side of the tub. It raised her height by at least a foot, and her head was just under the showerhead. Sheldon face was all questions. She slipped an arm under each of his armpits, wrapping them back around until her hands peeked back over his shoulders, and pulled him closer until their bodies were touching. She leaned into his ear.

“Fuck me,” she commanded.

Thoroughly aroused and subservient, he leaned one hand against the wall, just above her shoulder, and used the other to gently guide himself inside her. Then, with that hand now free, he placed it against the wall over her other shoulder. He took a second to find his footing and then…

Once, firm and deep. And then a second time. And then a third time and again, falling into an escalating rhythm. Sheldon leaned his forehead into her shoulder and—her eyes closed and her breaths shallow—she laid her head back against the wall, grasping the hair on the back of his head between her fingers. Amy’s entire body, already well into a pleasurable ascent, suddenly was overcome with sensual, carnal sensitivity. She could feel the foam sandals that almost seemed to massage the bottom of her feet as she dug her toes into them; she could feel the cool tiles against her back; she could feel Sheldon’s hair—slick and wet—against her collarbone and his labored, hot breaths as they blew through the nape of her neck, skipping beads of water down her chest and over her nipples; and she could feel Sheldon pushing into her, thrusting into her, pleading with her body (and his own) to physically confirm the love that—despite everything—they never stopped having for each other.

Her body answered explosively, quaking powerfully under his tense muscles. Involuntarily, she let out a cry as she came, and she could feel her body weaken with pleasure. Her knees buckled under her, and she fell back against the wall, about to drop, when Sheldon grabbed her, wrapping one arm around her body and holding her in place and on her feet. It was only moments later that he reached his climax, trembling and moaning, and he collapsed forward onto Amy, closing the distance between them. As he gasped for breath, she dotted the crown of his head with lazy kisses, sloppy and weak, and he laid his head against her breasts.

They stayed like that for a while, and then… the water ran cold. They both hurriedly scrambled to the other side of the tub, and then, with Amy clinging to his arm, Sheldon reached down and turned off the faucet. Cowering in the corner arm in arm, they finally looked at each, noting the humor of the situation; a bright smile came over Amy’s face. Sheldon followed with a smile of his own. He kissed her again, the tender finale of their soapy tryst. Sheldon fell back against the wall.

“Amy?” Sheldon said, having not yet regained his breath.

“Yes?” she said, breathless as well.

“Do want to go and lie down?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes.”

With that, they got out of the tub and put on their robes, then scampered back to their room.

Penny gently peeled back the comforter and slipped from bed as quietly as she could. She didn’t want to wake her husband, but Leonard heard her just the same.

“Penny,” he said, sleep in his voice. “You okay?”
“Yeah,” she said. “Just gotta go and pee.”

“Need any help?” he asked.

“To go pee? No.” She paused a moment, shaking the numbness from her leg. “Just go back to sleep and get your rest. You have to wake up in an hour.”

Penny reached a hand forward and felt the wall as she went. The apartment was dark, but the kind of dark that signaled that dawn was nearing. On her way to the bathroom, she suddenly realized that stronger than her urge to relieve herself was her craving for Mike and Ike’s. She took a detour to the kitchen and opened the cabinet, groping around for the stash of boxed candies from which she’d been grazing for days. She pushed in the paper tab on one and filled her hand with candied pills, thrilled at the sound of the licorice candies sliding into the palm of her hand. She was about to pop some into her mouth when the light suddenly came on. She spun around and saw Beverly standing by the light switch; Penny started screaming at the top of her lungs and a moment later Leonard scrambled out of the bedroom.

“What happened?” he asked.

Gasping for air and grasping her chest, Penny pointed to his mother.

“What are you doing here?” Leonard asked.

“I spent the night, obviously,” Beverly answered simply, completely nonplussed.

“Um, why?” Leonard asked, baffled.

“Because, en route to the hotel, I learned that it would be hosting a children’s conference for the weekend. Need I even say that I would rather endanger the integrity of my spinal column by braving the craters and valleys of your couch than endure the unmitigated torture that comes with a sea of misbehaving urchins.” She placed her hand behind her. “However, considering the knot I have in my lower back, I’m questioning the soundness of my decision.”

“How did you get a key?” Penny asked.

“Oh, dear,” Beverly said amused, turning her head. “I made a copy of that several visits ago.”

“Mom,” Leonard said tersely, “you can’t just barge in as you please without permission.”

“Leonard, Leonard, Leonard,” Beverly said, sighing, “At the beginning of my arrival you all but pleaded for me to except your offer of lodging and now you whine because I’ve taking you up on that offer. Your inconsistency leaves with me with little choice other than to believe that your indecision is a pathetic attempt at manipulation. As your entire childhood should have taught you, however, I am impervious to such passive-aggressive ploys for control.”

“AAARRRGGGGHHH!” Leonard screamed in total frustration. Penny knocked back a handful of candy.

“Interesting choice of snack,” Beverly said, directing her comment to Penny, “particularly considering the arrangements you’ve put in place to deliver exactly nine days from now.”

Penny spoke through a mouthful of goo in her mouth. “What does that mean?”

“It means I would imagine you’d be avoiding glycyrrhizin at this stage in the game.”
“What the hell is glycyrrhizin?” Leonard asked.

“An active ingredient in licorice. It has long been proven to be a labor-inducing agent in pregnant women, as evidenced by extensive studies done in the country of Finland, where the typical citizen consumes two pounds of the confection each year—the highest percentage in the world.”

“Look, Beverly,” Penny said, already marching off. “I’m not having this conversation with you. I’ve been eating Mike and Ike’s for weeks and haven’t even had so much as a contraction. I’m going to go and pee and then I’m going back to bed.” She disappeared behind the door.

“Mom,” Leonard said, just barely repressing the ire he felt inside. “You have got to leave Penny alone, you have to respect boundaries and you have to—and I can’t emphasize this enough—stop analyzing every damn thing we do.”

“Very well, then. I’ll leave you, your wife, your boundaries and your unresolved psychological demons to stew on their own without my assistance.”

“Thank you,” Leonard said. “We’d really appreciate it.”

She went to the couch to collect her things and prepare to leave. Just as she opened the door, there was a loud shout from the bathroom.

“OH SHIT!”

Leonard jogged off in the direction of the bathroom. “Wait, Mother,” he said with a sigh, “don’t go just yet.”

Beverly shook her head. “I knew he’d need me,” she said, and shut the door.

Amy and Sheldon made their way to the kitchen, exploring their breakfast options. The kitchen, and the whole house for that matter, was shockingly quiet.

“It seems everyone has gone out for breakfast,” Sheldon said as he trailed Amy.

She walked to the pantry, opening the door. “ Seems they’ve made a wise decision,” she said.

Sheldon peered over her shoulder. There were cans of soup, various canned meats, Pop-Tarts and a box of Fruit Loops.

“Oh how I bemoan the lack of high-fiber options,” Sheldon said.

Amy walked over to the fridge. “There’s Hot Pockets,” she said.

Sheldon sighed. “It would practically be unseemly to eat such a thing so early in the morning. Or ever.”

“Well, there’re also Eggo’s,” she said. “And they are whole-grain.”

Sheldon was suitable pleased. “Okay,” he said, suddenly jolly and joined her at the fridge.

After locating the toaster, scrubbing it, plugging it in, and locating the syrup, Amy and Sheldon sat down, awaiting breakfast. Just then, Patch and Kristen entered the kitchen, presumably entering from the back porch.

The air was a bit icy between them.
“Good morning,” Patch said, feigning cheeriness.

“Good morning,” Sheldon and Amy muttered in unison.

“How come on, guys,” he said, walking over to the coffee machine and poured himself a glass. “That flaccid greeting will never do.”

Kristen snickered.

“Perhaps we would be friendlier if you apologized,” Sheldon said.

“For what?” patch said.

“For accusing us of dishonesty.”

He stirred his cream into his coffee. “Very well then. Sheldon, Amy, I apologize for accusing you of cheating. It is clear to me that you are a very harmonious couple and credibly know quite a bit about each other.”

“I forgive you,” Amy said.

“I don’t,” Sheldon said. “But for the sake of Amy, I’ll put for an effort to keep a cordial rapport.”

“Aw, Sheldon,” Patch said, taking a seat at the table. There was a hint of mockery in his tone. “You’d think you wouldn’t be so grumpy after getting lucky last night.”

Sheldon—utterly mortified—snapped his head to Amy. She grinned back mischievously.

“I am afraid you are mistaken,” Sheldon said.

“Am I?” Patch said. “My room’s right next to the bathroom. I hear every flush, every fart, … every moan.”

“Now that is enough,” Sheldon yelled, pushed from his seat.

“No need to be bashful,” he said. “That’s why I date younger women. My peers have no appreciation for the eroticism of sexual spontaneity.”

Sheldon was apoplectic. “This conversation is entirely out of bounds, Patch, and I demand that you dispense with this kind of talk immediately.”

“Please. Have some respect,” Amy said.

Patch and Kristen looked at each other, thoroughly amused. “I’m surprised that you agreed to a weekend with this group,” he said. “They usually don’t mix prudes and nudes.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Sheldon says, “but it sounds vulgar and I—”

“Simmer down,” Patch said. “Kristen and I just came to get some coffee and head back out to the patio with the gang.” The rose to leave.

“Why are you wearing a Speedo?” Amy suddenly asked, the nature of his attire dawning on her for the first time.

“And why is she wearing a bikini?” Sheldon asked.
“Well, considering that we’re in a ‘family situation,’” Patch explained. “I thought a little modesty was in order.”

“Modesty?” Amy said. “What would you typically be wearing?”

Kristen and Patch looked at each other, confused. “Nothing.”

“Do you mean to tell me that everyone is outside absolutely naked?” Sheldon asked.

“Come see for yourself,” Patch said, and walked out of the back door, as Kristen followed.

Panicked, Sheldon ran to the back door and stuck his head out to see the patio covered with every shade of skin imaginable, and not much else. He ran back inside, gasping.

“Was it bad?” Amy asked, now standing.

“I believe the damage done to my eyes is irreparable.”

“Unbelievable,” Amy said.

“That’s it,” “This is had gotten completely out of hand.” Sheldon said, marching to the communal room. “I’m calling Beverly.” He snatched the phone off the receiver and dialed her number. Based on their other attempts to reach the woman, Amy didn’t expect her to answer, but was stunned when Sheldon spoke. “Hello, Beverly,” he said. “We need to talk.”

“Put it on speaker,” Amy begged, and Sheldon did so.

“I would reply with a greeting,” Beverly said, “but I have no idea with whom I am speaking.”

“This is Sheldon,” he clarified, “and Amy and I just had the horrifically disturbing experience of walking out to the patio of our lodging facility, only to be greeted by six adult humans wearing the exact same clothing they were born with.”

“They were nude?” Beverly asked.

“Yes,” Sheldon replied. “They were nude, and two others scantily clad.”

“That’s not surprising,” Beverly said. “Dr. Singh is a nudist. He likely recruited participants from his association.”

“As much as it grieves me to say so, I suspect that you deceived us as to the exact nature of this venture for personal advantage, although I am unsure of what that advantage might be.”

“Oh, come now, Sheldon,” Beverly said. “You’ll be given at least $1000 a piece for your efforts. Some discomfort and exposure to an alternate lifestyle is a small price to pay.”

“Excuse me,” Amy said, joining the conversation. “Did you say $1000?”

“I don’t know what the exact figure is. You’ll have to discuss the particulars with Dr. Singh.”

“But you said that we would be compensated at $20,000,” Sheldon said.

“Then I misspoke,” Beverly said. “I believe he has budgeted $20,000 total in compensation to the participants as a whole.”

“Which means if there are ten participants,” Amy said, “then we will only be getting tenth of that
“Yes,” Beverly said. “Of course, after you deduct my finding fee.”

“Which is how much?” Sheldon asked.

“Eight-thousand dollars,” Beverly said.

“EIGHT-THOUSAND DOLLARS!” Amy and Sheldon screamed unanimously.

“I find it to be a shockingly low amount as well,” Beverly said. “I hope he realizes this is my retirement gift to him.”

“That leaves us with a paltry $2400 as a couple,” Sheldon said, aghast.

“Sheldon,” Beverly said, exasperated, “I quoted that approximate figure at the outset of this conversation. Honestly, this conversation is growing more circular by the minute.”

“Beverly,” Amy said, her voice rising, “you should know that this amounts to a breach of contract and—"

“As much as I would love to entertain this tirade,” Beverly said, “I must go. I am preoccupied with other business.”

“And what business might that be?” Sheldon said. “Swindling other unsuspecting test subjects?”

“Actually,” Beverly said rather casually. “Penny’s in labor.”

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Only Girl (In the World) – Rihanna | Love Shack – The B-52s
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

White blouse, navy skirt and… red pumps? Close enough.

Chapter Notes

For Rae.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ian was sitting on the couch when Lise-Marie walked in from the kitchen bearing two cups of coffee. Still clad in her flannel pajamas, she handed one cup to Ian, which he accepted appreciatively. She sat down next to him, tucking one leg under herself and settling in to watch his favorite morning show. A popular interest story about a pet pig left them both overcome with laughter, and by the time they had caught their breaths, she found herself leaning on his shoulder; more surprisingly, he didn't resist the tepid bit of connection. She was thinking about a second cup of coffee when the show switched to the news.

"In an on-going saga that has Caltech embroiled in a cyber-era whodunit, the school and authorities are in search of the culprit behind a massive security breach that has them combing the area, if not the nation."

Lise-Marie sat straight up, panicked, but trying to conceal her alarm.

"Let's watch something else," she said hurriedly, reaching for the remote.

Ian playfully snatched it away. "One sec," he said. "Just let me catch the baseball recap from yesterday."

"Google it," she said, reaching for the remote again.

He pulled it away again, amused. "You would Google your lunch if you could," he said.

"Seriously, Ian," she said more firmly, but her protests came too late. Her face went pale as her photo appeared in the upper, right-hand corner of the screen. Ian followed her stunned eyes to the television and, just as surprised, he turned up the volume.

"A foreign researcher by the name of Lisa-Mary Zurbrigen," the newscaster reported, "is alleged to have downloaded as many as 100 terabytes of classified information from Caltech servers and their connected networks, some of which contained shared information that had connections to federal research programs."

Horrified, Lise-Marie inexplicably stood up. Then she suddenly sat back down.

Ian looked at her. His face was tranquil: absent of judgment, but he couldn't hide his shock.
"Is this true?" he asked simply.

She looked back towards the TV and just shook her head, struggling for the words. "There are so many lies in there," she said. "My name isn't even Lisa-Mary. One hundred terabytes? That's ridiculous. And, and, and the information was not classified."

"Then what was it?" he asked.

She looked back at him and took a hard breath. She placed both hands over her mouth.

"What is going on, Lise?" he asked.

She looked down, agonized by what she had to say, before trying again. "I got into some trouble."

He looked away, shaking his head.

Lise-Marie grew more frenzied. "I just," she stammered, "I took over Sheldon's job and it was… it was so much; I didn't even know where to start. I never intended to breach anything… I just needed a shortcut… to get up to speed… I just—"

"How do you even know how to hack into servers?" he interrupted.

"I didn't hack in, per se. I watched Sheldon type in his password, and he had a higher clearance than I did. The other tricks I learned from some kids back at the LHC. It was just a joke… back then."

"Who's Sheldon?" he asked.

She shook her head, not even answering. She buried her head into her hands.

Ian rose, walking over to a nearby table, leaning against it on both hands with his head hung down. "What made you come here?"

She rose and walked over to him while keeping a safe distance. "You're the only person I know in the United States," she said. "You're my only friend."

"Unbelievable."

"I did not want you to get dragged into this," she explained. "You have to understand that."

He spun around, suddenly angry. "What I understand is that you haven't changed one bit, Lise-Marie!" he yelled. "You're still a liar."

She was incensed at the accusation, taking a bold step forward. "Don't you DARE call me a liar!" she screamed. "You lied to me!"

"I didn't lie to you," he snapped back. "I had every intention to come through on my promises, but when I was going down, I had the decency to leave you alone!"

"I didn't want to be left alone!" she yelled. He just shook his head dismissively. But she would not be dismissed. "That is the last thing I wanted."

"What the fuck difference did it make?" Ian shouted. "I was going to prison!"

"It made a difference to me," she said, her voice breaking. "I put my life on hold for you only for you to disappear one day."
"Yeah, well, a lot of people disappeared that day, Lise," he said. "When the shit hit the fan everybody abandoned me, and I do mean everybody. My parents, my friends, my colleagues. My wife said she could take my cheating, but when my money left, she left with it."

"I would have stuck by you. I would have left Switzerland. I would have moved here and I would have waited for you."

He sighed, baffled. "Lise-Marie," he said, pleading with almost pity in voice, "you were just a girl."

"I was a woman," she insisted.

"You were 19. I was 11 years your senior. You father wanted my head on a plate."

"I did not answer to my father. I did not answer to anyone but myself, and I was willing to give up everything for you."

"I was married. You were married."

"I ended my marriage." She paused. "I lo—"

He cut her off and turned his face away, the words visibly overwhelming him. "Don't say that."

His reaction stunned Lise-Marie. "Why not?"

"Because I can't go back there."

For the first time since she'd gotten there, she'd seen some flicker of the man she used to know. "You can't go back, or you don't want to?"

He shook his head, still looking away. "I can't, I won't. Prison was the best thing that ever happened to me," he said, a little short on conviction. "I learned about accountability, and doing things the right way, and letting go of—"

"So you never think about the dreams we had?" she said. "Dreams of greatness. Of doing big things. Of doing those things together?"

He looked back at her, his eyes low. "Of course, I do."

"You have grown soft," she said, continuing. "You used to have hunger, ambition, pride. You used to aspire for great things. Now you have contented yourself with three days of work a month and a life of daytime television. You are more than this, Ian. I am more than this." She took another step forward. "Let's not make the same mistake we made last time."

He looked confused. "What does that mean?"

She gathered her courage before she spoke, but when she did her voice was firm. "Come with me."

They stood staring at each other, unblinkingly. She drew closer, talked faster.

"I am leaving in two days. I am catching a flight to Montana where someone will smuggle me into Canada through a weak spot in the border. From there, I am traveling to Toronto. You can meet me there, where we can catch a flight to Greenland where I have—"

It was all too much. "And why would I do that?" he asked.
She took one final step forward, until she was right up on him. There was barely a hair's breadth between them. "Because deep down inside, I know you can still swim with the sharks." Slowly she put her hands up to his chest. "Do not push me away," she said. "You have no idea how long it has been since someone just treated me with kindness and respect, hoping for nothing in return. I had almost forgotten what it felt like." He didn't move, didn't budge. "Please. Do not look at me like that," she said. She placed her head against his chest. Then she embraced him, strongly, clinging to him, hoping that the tender man that had doted on her chastely for the last few days could be willed back to her. After a moment, she could feel his arms rise, and one hand landed on her back, and one cradled the back of her head. "Please," she said again. "Please," she pleaded. She looked up at his eyes, and he looked back at her, contemplating her face for several moments. Then he put both of his hands on hers, taking them gently.

"You have to turn yourself in," he said.

It felt like a blow to her gut.

"No," she said.

"I'll go with you," he said. "I'll help you."

She shook her head. "I cannot do that." She was pleading. "Do not make me do that, Ian."

He was decided. "You can't stay here," he said.

Fighting back tears, she stumbled away to the living room and began hurriedly stuffing her few belongings into her bag. Ian followed her.

"What are you doing?"

"You don't care," she said.

"I do care," he said. "If I didn't care I would join you in this insane charade."

"Don't talk to me," she said.

He took her arm. "Let me help you."

"You can help me by coming with me," she said through her tears. He just shook his head. "Then I have to do this my way," she said. She grabbed her bag, opened the front and left, slamming the door behind her.

Upon hearing the news that Penny was in labor, Sheldon and Amy exploded into a frenzy of hurried packing. Amy's explosion was considerably larger than Sheldon's, and she was practically beside herself with giddiness. Sheldon, for his part, mostly seemed relieved to have an excuse to leave.

They debated on saying goodbye to their fellow lodgers, before deciding that a farewell note taped to the TV would suffice. Within a half hour, they were on the road.

"Do you think they'll ask us to be Penelope's godparents?" she asked.

"I certainly hope not," Sheldon replied.

"Why not?"
Sheldon sighed and settled back into his seat, signaling one of his legendarily long replies. "Godparents were invented to be the pre-determined spiritual heirs of orphans, vowing to rear their wards according to the tenets of the Church."

Amy was doubtful. "I hardly think Leonard and Penny will make us vow to take their daughter to Mass every Sunday."

"We should be so lucky," Sheldon said warily. "Today's so-called 'godparents' must fulfill a laundry list of duties to their charges while such children still have two able-bodied, living parents. Duties include obligatory attendance at events varying from recitals to birthday parties, compulsory gift-giving at all major holidays, not to mention the financial obligation to assume the cost of football uniforms and Girl Scout cookies whenever the parents come up short."

"But in return," Amy reasoned, "you get a special bond with your dear friend's child."

Sheldon looked at her with horror. "I can barely tolerate the presence of children that aren't my own."

Amy shook her head. Just then, Sheldon's phone began exploding with messages, alerts and game notifications. His elation could not be contained.

"What joy to be back among the living and clothed of the 21st Century," he said. "I've never been so overjoyed to leave a place in my life."

"I'd love to agree with you," Amy said, "and this excursion certainly made my short list, but that distinction goes to a summer camp I attended in the fifth grade. Within hours of my arrival I fell into poison ivy, and was plagued by a bitter rash for the duration of my two-week stay. I spent more time in quarantine than I spent in my cabin. To this day, I don't know what the other children did. I heard the lake was beautiful."

"I never went to camp," Sheldon said. "Instead, I spent my single-digit years in Vacation Bible School, where we spent our days coloring pictures of Abraham, memorizing scripture and making unseaworthy models of Noah's ark out of popsicle sticks. I insisted on wearing gloves so as not to be contaminated by the saliva of my fellow playmates."

"All considered," Amy said, "this summer retreat wasn't so bad."

"I imagine not," Sheldon said. He looked down at his iPad.

Amy's mind drifted elsewhere, to the party. It had only been a week prior, but it seemed like it had been much longer. A lot had happened. Ugly things. Scary things. Things that had made her very sad.

"Even though Beverly thoroughly deceived us, and rather unremorsefully," Amy said, "I'm glad she did this."

Sheldon glanced up at her for a second before turning his attention back to his iPad. "Why?" he asked.

"Well, six days ago, I thought our whole world was falling apart… everything we hoped and worked for was disappearing before our eyes."

Sheldon looked up, uneasy, without making eye contact with Amy.

"And now?" he asked.
"And now," she said, taking a deep breath, "now, I feel like whatever happens, if we get the house or not, if I get the job or not… somehow everything is going to be okay."

Sheldon looked at her, his face calm, serious. She glanced over at him, absorbing the somberness she was sure he was feeling.

"I'm sorry your project didn't work out," she said. "I know it meant a lot to you."

He looked straight ahead, not saying anything at first, squinting out ahead at the road unfolding before them. "I'm beginning to think that I gave too much importance to the value of that project," he said.

"How so?"

"I got swept up into the stealth and prestige surrounding it, convincing myself—deceiving myself—that it would be my only opportunity to get the professional distinction I covet most. But any one of DaVinci's inventions or creations could have brought him the success he enjoyed. Lightning can strike twice." He sighed and turned to Amy. "Amy, do you remember when we were in the blue cottage on Mulberry Street in Washington"

She nodded.

"A couple days ago, I recalled the research I was doing back then. So much happened then that I never picked it back up. I've started thinking about it again."

Amy looked at his eyes, and saw that spark he got whenever something captured his interest. "You're going to get the Prize someday, Sheldon," she said, without a trace of doubt.

"You're going to get your job, and your career… and your house," he said.

For the first time in days, she believed him.

Lise-Marie opened her purse and handed the taxi driver a fifty. "Keep the change," she said as she alighted from the cab. As the driver pulled away, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. In a profanity-laced phone call to her contact in Montana earlier that morning, she'd learned that he was unwilling to budge on their original timeline, and he wouldn't be ready for her for another two days and not a minute sooner. The sky was falling, however, and she didn't have two days; she barely had two hours. She had to leave now. There was no way she could take her chances with a major airport like San José or Oakland, and crossing the border on the road would be too dangerous. Her best chance was here, in a small, regional airport.

Looking up at the façade of the building, she confirmed that she was at the right place: Watsonville Municipal Airport. She took a deep breath and slipped on her aviator glasses. With reflective lenses, they did a superb job of concealing her eyes. She was betting on her charisma and luck to do the rest. She entered the building and walked up to the counter, pretending to eye the limited flight schedules. She bore a single piece of luggage in one hand and a billfold in the other.

"Hello. My name is Nancy," said the young woman seated at the counter. "Will you be travelling on one of our scheduled flights today?"

"No, actually," Lise-Marie said, her dark glasses perched on the end of her nose. "It is my understanding that there is a chartered flight travelling out to Monterrey in the hour. I would like to board it."
"You're nowhere from Monterey," Nancy said, a chuckle in her voice. "Why don't you just catch a cab?"

"Monterrey, Mexico," Lise-Marie said, far from amused.

"Of course. I was only joking," Nancy said, her smile fading. "Indeed, there is one leaving. Let me see your passport." Lise-Marie handed the woman the billfold, and Nancy took a good look at the picture before looking back at her customer. "I'm sorry," she said, "you'll have to take off your glasses."

"Of course," Lise-Marie said, slowly lowering the glasses from her face, praying to the gods this would work. Ian definitely had a type, and his ex-wife was a skinny blonde with blue eyes and, in the picture, was about the age Lise-Marie was now. Nancy gazed at Lise-Marie a long time, before looking pointedly at the photo again. She nodded hesitantly.

"Mrs. North," she said, "I'll need a major credit card."

"Do you accept cash?"

Nancy shrugged. "Well, sure, if you have $1100 on you." Lise-Marie procured her wallet and counted out 11 crisp bills. Nancy took the money from the other woman's hands, examining each bill and authenticating each one with a counterfeit bill marker. Each one, apparently, checked out. Then she turned back to her computer, typing away. She attempted to chat a little as she worked. "So that's an interesting accent you got there," she asked. "Where you'd pick it up?"

"My father was military," Lise-Marie explained. "I grew up abroad."

"Abroad, huh?" Nancy nodded slowly, and Lise-Marie could swear there was a bit of accusation in her tone.

"Yes, abroad," she said, her patience waning. "How much longer might this take?"

"Just a couple minutes, more," Nancy said, still typing away. She lifted the passport from the counter once more, scanning the barcode just inside the cover. The computer let out the sound of a menacing beep. She stared at the screen intently.

"What is it saying?" Lise-Marie asked, a bit urgently. She craned her neck towards the monitor, but couldn't see anything.

"One moment please," Nancy said, her gaze fixed on the screen in a way that Lise-Marie found maddening.

"But it's not expired," she said in her own unsolicited defense. "It does not expire until next year."

"I see that," Nancy said without looking up, her tone all business.

"It is simple. I am Karen North, 36 years old, blonde, blue-eyed. The flight leaves shortly, and I would like to be on it."

"One moment please," Nancy said and, passport in hand, headed to the back. There was no door and so, leaning forward, Lise-Marie could see the woman speaking with another man, showing him the passport. Lise-Marie didn't miss the suspicion in the other woman's eyes as she glared at the document and back out at Lise-Marie. A moment later, the man lifted a walkie-talkie up to his mouth, turning his face away. Lise-Marie had no idea who he was contacting, but she knew she had to get out of there—and quickly. Turning around, she walked briskly to the front doors and
back outside. She had—at most—a minute, maybe two to get away, and she couldn't chance it on
foot. She spotted an elderly man who was unloading luggage from the trunk of his car; a woman
she could only assume was his wife stood on the curb a few paces away. Lise-Marie glanced down
at her own outfit of a white blouse, navy skirt and… red pumps? Close enough, she thought and,
composing herself, she put on her brightest smile and marched forward.

"Hello," she said brightly. "I am your valet. I will be happy to park your car for you."

"Oh, but parking is just a few feet away," he said. "I'll do it."

"Nonsense," Lise-Marie said, slamming the trunk shut. She walked towards the driver's side of the
vehicle.

"You should give your back a rest," his wife said the woman on the curb, anxiously. She spoke to
Lise-Marie. "He shouldn't have even been lifting that luggage."

"Fine," he said, reaching for his wallet, "but at least let me give the young lady a tip."

Lise-Marie just waved her hand. "None necessary," she said, and then hopped into the driver's seat
of the idling car. She managed to drive around the corner and almost out of the parking lot when
she heard stirring in the backseat. She looked in her rear-view mirror and saw a little boy sitting
there. He wasn't a day over nine.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, surprisingly calm.

She slammed on the brakes. "Nowhere," she barked. "Get out."

Suddenly frightened, the boy scrambled out of the door, closing it behind him. As the lock clicked,
Lise-Marie heard the ringing of sirens and tore off again, smashing through the parking gate and
hearing her own wheels squeal as she pealed around the corner and down the busy street below.

"A kidnapping would have been most inconvenient," she muttered to herself as she got on the
freeway, headed south.

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Amy and Sheldon, mercifully spared from the traffic and misfortune that plagued their trip down,
not to mention aided by Amy's rather "spirited" driving, got back to Pasadena by 10:00. They raced
to the fifth floor of the hospital and, after registering with the front desk, rushed down to the
maternity ward waiting room. Unsurprisingly, Bernadette, Howard, Raj, Mary and the twins were
scattered around the room. All the usual suspects were there, except for one: Beverly. Upon seeing
their parents, Aditi and Robert hopped up and ran to them, hugging their legs tightly.

"Mommy and Daddy!" they cried, and the whole family joined in a group bear hug.

"Pick me up! Pick me up!" Aditi said, jumping up and down. With a grunt, Sheldon complied and
then walked over to where his mother was sitting. Amy and Robert followed, hand in hand.

"I didn't think I'd see you two anytime soon," Mary said. "Did you fly up?"

Sheldon glared at Amy. "Our velocity approached levels that came just short of overcoming
gravity."

"I couldn't miss the birth of Penelope, now could I?" Amy said. She looked down at Robert,
tugging at his hand. "I trust the children behaved themselves."
"Oh, they were angels," Mary said. "Half the time they were just playing with the boys. I barely had to do anything but feed and bathe them and take them for a walk."

"Mom," Sheldon said, "you do realize you weren't dog sitting, don't you?"

"Oh hush, Shelly," Mary said.

"Hold on," Amy said, taking a look around the room. "What boys?"

"The little foreign ones," Mary said. She leaned forward, whispering. "We aren't still pretending they're twins, are we?"

Robert pulled away and went to sit next to Adam, where the two boys started crashing toy cars into each other. Amy could scarcely believe her eyes. A wide smile came over her face. She looked back at Aditi.

"I'm so proud of you," she said, brushing her hand against her daughter's face. "You weren't afraid?"

Aditi just shook her head, jolly and bright. "I can say tatti!" she cried.

"What does that mean?" Amy asked.

"Poop," Howard replied through gritted teeth. He cut his eye over to the corner, where Raj was sitting, silently laughing to the point of tears.

"Adam taught it to me!" Aditi said, smiling from ear to ear.

Mary shook her head. "Still happy they're learning other languages now, Shelly?"

Just then Amy's phone rang. She checked and saw it was the phone number to their rental office. "I have to take this," she said, and walked outside of the room.

Sheldon took a seat next to his mother, placing Aditi on his lap and leaning his head back against the wall. His mind had been racing for the last several hours as he re-entered civilization, but it was finally calming down, and as it did, it inevitably returned to the matter that plagued him most: the house. In the last few days, he and Amy danced around the topic until it had almost become taboo between them, but one simple fact remained: if they didn't come up with the money for the increased down payment by 6:00 that day, the house...

Was gone.

The thought of it put him in a cold sweat. He was Sheldon Cooper, a man noted for his problem-solving abilities and advanced cognitive skills, and yet nothing was coming to him. He racked his brain, combing his mind for every possible option, but no solution emerged. As a scientist, he knew that often the simplest answer was the right answer, and he figured that the answer must be right under his nose.

Aditi tapped him on the chest.

"Yes, Aditi?" he asked.

"Can I read you this book?" she asked.

He looked down and saw that she was holding the book *You and I Count to 20*. It had become a minor obsession ever since she figured out he had written it. He nodded his head.
She opened the book up and began to read. "Dedication: To Mary Cooper, the…"

Mary leaned over to Sheldon's ear. "She just loves that book to death." She sighed. "I can't believe they've gotten so big. Where did the years go?"

Sheldon didn't respond. It wasn't something he thought about a lot, but sometimes he did marvel at the passage of time. Aditi tapped his chest again.

"You aren't listening," she complained.

"I am," Sheldon said. "Continue reading."

Aditi did so.

Mary furrowed her brow. "So how much are you getting for that book?" she asked.

Sheldon turned at his mother, mildly surprised by her inquiry. "Nothing."

Mary looked at him, alarmed. "Well why not?"

Sheldon shrugged. "Moonie said that it was for a fundraiser and that I should expect little compensation. I assumed it was a euphemism for nothing and carried on living my life."

Mary was appalled. "He's been selling that thing every year at the Texas State Fair and, believe you me, he has been making a pretty penny off of them books."

Sheldon perked up at the news. "Naturally," he said, unsurprised. "The book is a virtual treasure trove of both juvenile education and entertainment."

"It's also supposed to be making you money. I'm calling Moonie right now," Mary said, scrolling through her address book. She squinted at the small screen, holding the phone at least a foot from her face. "Now I know I put him in here under… I think it was 'M' for Moonie or… hold on, I think I did 'P' for publishing… nope, wasn't that. His last name is 'Fairfield' if I'm not mistaken."

"Allow me, Mom," Sheldon said, taking the phone from her hand and scrolling through hundreds of contacts with names like "Stumpy" and "Bake sale lady." He found it under "L" for "Lorna's son."

"That's it," Mary said. "You question my system but it hasn't failed me yet."

Sheldon rolled his eyes and called him. To his surprise, Moonie answered.

"Hello, Moonie. This is your cousin Sheldon."

"Hey, Sheldon! Long time no hear," he said jovially. Sheldon did not reply in kind.

"That is the very matter which concerns me," he said, perturbed. "My mother informs me that despite the fact that you have been enjoying the lucrative fruitage from the sale of my children's book, I've yet to see a single penny of profit."

"That's surprising," Moonie said. "I've been sending the checks."

Sheldon furrowed his brow in disbelief. "Where?"

"Gimme a sec," Moonie said. Several moments passed, and when he returned, he spoke as if he were reading from a piece of paper. "It says here '73 Mulberry Street—"
"I haven't lived in Washington for five years!" Sheldon exclaimed.

"Then that could be the source of the problem," Moonie said with another chuckle. "I was wondering why those checks weren't clearing. I just figured you didn't need the money."

Sheldon sighed.

"What's your current address?" Moonie asked.

Mary, who had been leaning into the receiver, spoke up. "Tell him to wire it to you," she said. "You've been waiting long enough."

"My mother suggests that you wire Amy and me the money. Perhaps to the Western Union here in Pasadena on Adelman Street."

"Can do," Moonie said. "I'll send it within the hour. Take care, Sheldon."

Sheldon nodded, rather pleased. "Oh," he said suddenly, before hanging up. "Just how much am I owed?"

"All together?" Moonie took a second to answer. "It should be $19,862.57."

Sheldon stood up, gob smacked. Aditi nearly fell out of his lap, but he caught her, lowering her to the floor. "TWENTY-THOUSAND DOLLARS!" he said. Everyone turned around at the outburst.

"Yeah," Moonie said, nonchalantly. "I told you it wouldn't be much."

Sheldon tried to regain composure. "Of course, of course," he said. "A minimal token for my efforts." He hung up, then looked around, searching for Amy, but couldn't find her. "Where is Amy?" he whispered aloud.

"She left," Bernadette answered.

"She left?"

"Yeah, while you were on the phone, she told me to tell you that an emergency happened at the apartment. The maintenance man called and said there was a gas leak or something."

Sheldon didn't like that news. He took out his phone to call Amy when it rang in his hand. When he answered, it was Dr. Seibert.

"Dr. Cooper," he said, without a greeting, "The Feds trailed Lise-Marie all the way to Monterey. Turns out she'd been hiding out at an old boyfriend's house the whole time."

"That's good," Sheldon said. "Have they made an arrest?"

"No. That's why I'm calling," Seibert said. He sighed deeply. "She stole a car from an elderly couple at an airport this morning and the police found it dumped on the side of the road a block away from Pasadena Central Mall."

Sheldon's breath caught. "That means..."

Seibert nodded. "Yep. She's back."

Amy walked up the stairs to the apartment hurriedly. She'd never forgive herself if she missed the
birth of Penny's baby. Besides, she had some very helpful tips she thought Penny and Leonard would appreciate when it came to breastfeeding and areola massage. She planned to assist Joe, the maintenance man, with whatever he needed and then be on her way.

She stuck her key in the door, and went in. She was surprised to find the lights out; Joe had said he would meet her here. She scratched absently at the side of her face, and then turned on the light. Her heart nearly leapt from her chest when she saw Lise-Marie standing there.

"What are you doing in our apartment?" she asked, breathless with shock.

Lise-Marie's face was stern and her jaw set. "Amy," she said, with gristle in her voice, "we need to talk."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter made a lot of references to The Gamete Indeterminacy, which I started writing a year ago (!!!). For my readers who have been here for the whole journey, I can't say thank you enough.

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Favorite Year – The Dixie Chicks
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Raj is this close to time out.

Penny had read roughly half of the book "What to Expect When You're Expecting" (the movie was better), sat through hundreds of ER reruns, and DVR'd whole seasons of Grey's Anatomy. She had even made it to a Lamaze class or two. Still, nothing had prepared her for this.

"AAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGG GGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" she yelled, dangerously close to Leonard's ear. He used the index finger of his free hand to shake the ringing out of his ear. Penny held his right hand (that he might never be able to write with again) in a death grip.

"Just breathe, honey," he said, his voice pleasant and encouraging.

Her voice was not so pleasant. "I am breathing," she growled.

"Well," he began, trying again, "breathe like we learned in the class."

"YOU breathe like we learned in the class!" she yelled.

"But, I'm not the one—"

"SHUT UP, LEONARD!"

"Okay," he said meekly, and sat down. Penny's head went crashing back to the pillow.

Earlier in the day, when the contractions had been farther apart, she'd remembered thinking that this whole "labor" thing might be overrated. That it might not be so bad. That she could deliver this baby like a boss. Now her mind was consumed with one thought:

GET THIS THING OUT OF ME!

"The epidural still isn't working," Penny complained to the nurse.

"It's only been three minutes," she replied. "Give it some time."

"Three minutes?" Penny whined, rolling her head around and feeling desperate. She would have sworn they had given her the medication hours ago. She took several deep breaths and closed her eyes, trying to calm herself down in preparation for the next round of pain. Suddenly, there was an announcement over the speakers in the hospital.

"Howard Wolowitz, please report to the fourth floor; Howard Wolowitz, please report to the fourth floor. Your mother needs you."

"OH MY GOD!" Penny shouted, absolutely annoyed. "Why am I listening to a PA announcement for Howard?"

"Turns out his mother was already scheduled for a colonoscopy today," Leonard explained. "He's
splitting his time between the maternity ward and Gastroenterology."

Penny rolled her eyes.

The door opened, and in walked Dr. Harper. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Hofstadter," he said, jolly. He glanced down at his iPad. "Seems we're having a baby."

"I'm having a baby," Penny said, murder in her eyes.

"So you are," the doctor said.

"Where they hell have you been, anyway?" Penny yelled.

"Assisting other patients," the doctor said, remarkably unruffled. "I'm sure the nurses have been attending to you in satisfactory manner. They are all very well trained."

"Yeah, well," Penny said with a sneer, "that short one in the puppy scrubs won't let me have a sandwich."

"I'm sorry, doctor," Leonard said, embarrassed. "She's not normally like this."

"They never are," Dr. Harper said. He took a seat on a short stool positioned in between Penny's spread legs, and took a look around. "You're doing great, Mrs. Hofstadter. You've already dilated to eight centimeters. When you get to ten, you can start pushing."

"How long will that take?" she asked, breathing hard.

"Not long," the doctor said. "It could be fifteen minutes."

"Okay," she said calmly, nodding her head.

"At most, it'll be an hour."

"AAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGG GGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" she yelled. Leonard winced and stuck his finger in his ear.

Amy stood just inside her apartment, mouth agape, staring at the physical manifestation of her worst nightmare.

"I am not here to startle you," Lise-Marie said calmly.

Amy's voice reflected the anger she felt. "You have no right to be here," she said. She took several steps forward, looking around. "Where is the maintenance man?"

"He is gone."

"Gone where?"

Lise-Marie didn't answer at first. Then, after a moment, she took a step forward. Amy took a step back. "Amy, I have something to tell you and I need you to listen very carefully."

"I'm not listening to anything," Amy said as she went back for the entrance. Lise-Marie, however, raced for the door, placing her body between it and Amy, and locked it, holding it shut. Amy looked at her, her fury mounting.
"Back away from the door, Lise-Marie," she commanded, but the other woman didn't budge. Lise-Marie reached out for the other woman, but Amy snatched her arm away and took a step back. She lowered her purse from her shoulder and started rummaging through it as Lise-Marie looked on.

"Amy," she said, "I am in a desperate situation and I believe you can assist me."

"I hope you rot in prison," Amy replied, face down in her purse.

"Then you will be happy to know that I already am," Lise-Marie replied. "I have no access to my bank or credit cards, I am unable to leave the country and I am precluded from returning to my home. I'm essentially a caged animal roaming free."

"You should be a caged animal in prison," Amy said. She continued rifling through her purse, so rattled she could barely see. Lise-Marie brought her face closer to Amy's, tacitly demanding her attention and forcing eye contact.

"There is a gentlemen," she continued, her voice firm and even, "who is already making preparations to smuggle me out of the country through Canada, where I will be traveling—"

"I don't want to hear any of this," Amy said.

"It is in your best interest that you did."

Amy looked up in disbelief. "Really?"

"Amy, you should be aware that I am not going to prison. Ever. I will do everything in my power, everything, to prevent it. And you should, too."

"Why is that?"

"Because if I go to prison, I must be indicted. If I am indicted, the investigators must collect evidence, and hold searches, and conduct interviews to establish their case. Then, they must take their case to trial, which will entail a new round of legal proceedings—every bit of which will directly involve you… and Sheldon. The entire process could drag on for months, if not years. However, if you assist me today, you will literally never hear from me again."

Amy paused for a moment, stunned by the fact that Lise-Marie's proposal actually seemed… appealing. Lise-Marie saw her faltering.

"Do not say no," she said.

Amy stood staring at her for several moments. When Amy spoke again, her voice was small.

"What do you want from me?"

Lise-Marie waited a beat before answering. "Two-thousand dollars."

Amy almost laughed at the notion. "Are you out of your mind?"

Lise-Marie responded frantically, talking fast. "I have thousands and thousands of dollars in a Swiss bank account that is yours when I get back. The Swiss are masters of untraceable money transfer."

"I'm not helping you and I'm calling the police," Amy said, finally locating her phone and pulling it from her purse.
Lise-Marie snatched the phone from Amy's hand and hid it behind her back. Amy was incensed.

"Surely you know that's not the only phone in the universe," Amy said, and raced over to the house phone, lifting the receiver. There was no dial tone. Amy looked back at Lise-Marie, whose face settled into something much more sinister and, for the first time, Amy felt afraid. Lise-Marie slowly advanced towards her, speaking as she did so.

"How much is your freedom worth, Amy?" she asked, her voice low and menacing. "What is the price you are willing to pay to have me out of your life? Out of Sheldon's life? Out of the lives of your children?" The way she said "children" sent a shiver through Amy's spine. Lise-Marie drew closer until they were practically touching. They stood facing each other, two petite women, squaring off like sharpshooters in the Old West with a score to settle. "If I were you," Lise-Marie said, "I would think two-thousand dollars is a bargain."

Amy said nothing, but she suddenly lunged at the woman, grabbing for her phone, but Lise-Marie batted her away. Amy dived at the phone again, only for Lise-Marie to block her a second time, and the two women fell to the floor, wrestling. One would get the better of the other, and struggle to get free, only to be pulled to the floor again by a tendril of hair or the sleeve of a blouse. It went that way for a while, their frantic tussle accompanied by yelps, screams and grunts, until the phone got knocked from Lise-Marie's hand, landing several feet away. Both women scrambled for the device, taking turns overcoming the other, but always falling short. Finally, abandoning the phone altogether, Amy grabbed Lise-Marie and pinned her to floor under the weight of her body, then stuck her left elbow into the woman's neck. The phone began to ring. As Lise-Marie flailed under her, gasping for air, Amy reached her right arm as far she could until the edges of her fingernails just barely grazed the rim of the phone. Taking one deep breath, she tried again, reaching with all of her might, and then felt the rush of victory when the tip of her finger touched the face of the phone. A smile on her face, she started sliding it back to herself, ever so slowly against the dense carpet, when she felt something cold and hard in the back of her head. There was no doubt in her mind what it was. She froze.

Lise-Marie pushed Amy from her body, and then stood up with great effort, audibly gasping for air as Amy crouched on the floor under her. Then she bent over, snatching the phone from the floor. Amy didn't move, didn't dare breathe, and could only think of Sheldon and the twins back at the hospital waiting for her.

Lise-Marie threw her disheveled, tangled hair over her shoulder, pulled down her skirt and muted the ringing phone. Then she looked at Amy, cowering on the floor.

"So," she said, panting. "Let's try this again."

"This is very odd," Sheldon said to himself, staring at his phone.

"What is?" Mary said.

"I keep calling Amy, but she's not answering."

"Maybe she's on the road," Mary said. "I saw an episode of Dr. Phil that said that too many people are dying these days from answering the phone while driving." She crossed her arms, smug. "You won't catch me doing it."

"Of course, you don't answer your phone ever," Sheldon muttered.

Just then, Beverly walked through the door. A stiff breeze went through the room. She seemed to
be surprised at the sight of the gathered crowd.

"I see Penelope's welcoming committee has arrived," she said coolly.

"Hello, Beverly," Bernadette said warmly, and rose to greet the other woman. "I thought me might be seeing you. You must be so excited." She held out her hand. Beverly looked aloofly at Bernadette's hand, and then wanly shook just the tips of her fingers.

"Where'd you run off to?" Mary asked Beverly brightly, though there was a hint of accusation that swam underneath.

"There was a matter I had to attend to," Beverly said. She turned to Sheldon. "Hello, Sheldon."

He looked at her with scorn, and then turned his face away. "Hello, Beverly," he grumbled.

His look did not go unnoticed. "You appear to be displeased," she said.

"Being a psychiatrist, I'm glad that you can at least correctly identify the emotion of another person when it is glaring you in the face."

Beverly seemed amused. "I've heard talk of this Sheldon, but I've never witnessed him first hand."

"Oh, honey," Mary said, "there is more where that came from."

"Indeed," Sheldon replied, "and she will be seeing much more of this version of me, Mom, as she has betrayed my confidence by putting me—and Amy—in a foreign environment, with unfavorable conditions, under false pretenses."

Mary furrowed her brow, concerned. "Don't tell me you didn't get your money."

"Nary a cent," Sheldon said. "To add insult to injury, Dr. Singh's elusiveness suggests that I won't be seeing one either."

"Oh Sheldon," Beverly said dismissively, opening up her purse and pulling out a compact mirror, "you have quite the flair for the dramatic."

"Do I?" he replied. "Then I suppose you believe that lodging in a sub-par bungalow—that required extensive cleaning, by the way—while lodging with hot-tempered nudists is your idea of a productive retreat."

"NUDISTS!" Mary said, sitting upright in her chair, and positively scandalized. "No clothes at all?!"

"Not a stitch," Sheldon said.

Mary turned to Beverly, appalled. "Tell me my boy is lying."

"How would I know?" she said. "I wasn't there."

"Well I sure don't see you bothered by it."

Beverly continued preening herself in the mirror. "The alternate lifestyles of others concerns me none. At least not since I retired. There's very little funding in it."

Mary sat back in her chair, crossing her arms and shaking her head. "I swear, this whole world is going to Hell in a hand basket and they are trying to take my Shelly with it... without giving him
his money."

"Oh, Mary," Beverly said, closing the compact and returning it to her purse nonchalantly. "I think your son's fornication will do the trick quite nicely without my assistance. Excuse me." She rose and walked out of the room.

"I've always found her to be warm and charming," Sheldon said, "but as of late, I've realized that she is positively disagreeable."

"Took you long enough," Mary said. "Besides, she shouldn't count you out just yet. If Amy gets her way, y'all'll be up and out of living in sin in no time."

Sheldon snapped to his mother's direction, perplexed. "What exactly do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Oh, Shelly, you're smart as a whip, but if you had the common sense God gave a lemon, you'd see that woman wants nothing in the world more than to put on a white dress and walk down an aisle with you standing at the bottom of it."

"I believe you're mistaken," Sheldon said. "I've asked on her on numerous occasions her views on matrimony and her responses have been tepid at best."

"Well, of course they have been," Mary said. "She may be a modern woman in so many ways, but deep down she's an old-fashioned romantic. She's never going to ask you outright, but that don't mean she doesn't want it."

Sheldon didn't say anything. Mary turned to him, and could see the mix of confusion and lingering doubt in his face. She placed a hand on his.

"Mark my words, Shelly," she said, tenderly. "Next time you see her, offer her a glimpse of forever, then look in her eyes, and if you don't see the glimmer of eternity staring back at you, well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit." She glanced over at the commotion of an escalating tug of war match between Raj and Robert. "Now if you y'all can't share that book of Sudoku I'm taking it and no one gets to play," she said sternly, pointing with her finger. Both boys calmed down. She turned back to Sheldon, whispering. "Raj is this close to time out."

Beverly entered the delivery room, standing at the threshold silently. She was standing at a vantage point that she was not easily seen and there was sufficient noise that she wasn't likely to be heard either.

"Leonard, you lied to me," Penny said, tears pressed from her eyes and her voice strained.

"When?!" Leonard said, panicking.

"You said having a baby would be fun," she said, sobbing.

Leonard bit his bottom lip, thinking. "Actually, when I said that, I was referring to after—"

"YOU LIED TO ME!" Penny yelled.

Beverly, at last, cleared her throat. All eyes turned to her.

"I see that, as of yet, I am not too late," she said, still keeping a wary distance. "I'm just here to notify you that I will be awaiting the birth from the, aptly named 'waiting room.'"
"Where have you been, Mother?" Leonard asked.

"There was a matter I had to attend to."

Leonard was agitated at the statement. "What matter could possibly be more important than the birth of your grandchild?!"

"The birth of my grandchild hardly means that absolutely nothing else of import is happening."

"Then what was it? Tell me," he demanded.

"Never mind what it was, Leonard."

"Tell me, Mother."

"It is none of your affair."

"That's because it wasn't anything."

She sighed, condescendingly. "It was something, Leonard, otherwise it would be 'nothing,' and 'nothing' isn't anything." She paused. "Now look what you've done. You have me sounding like a Philosophy major."

"If it was something you would tell me."

"Fine, Beverly said. "I had to make a call to Shelby, my personal assistant, to confirm that she is attending to matters as I have specified."

Leonard shook his head, incensed. "That's bull."

"Excuse me?" Beverly said. "Is that any way to speak to your mother?"

A nurse intervened. "This conversation should probably be continued elsewhere."

Leonard didn't hear her, though; he was too upset. "You always do this," he yelled. "You always put any and every little thing ahead of me."

"You would make the birth of your child about you?" Beverly replied.

"IT IS ABOUT ME!" he yelled. "This is about me. This is important to me. Why can't you just recognize that for once in your life and—"

"I'm sorry," the nurse interrupted more forcefully, and rose from where she had been seated. "But the younger Mrs. Hofstadter is in the final stages of her labor and deserves to deliver in a peaceful and calm environment."

"Very well then," Beverly said, smoothing down her skirt. "I know when I'm not wanted." She turned to leave. "I'll be returning to New Jersey immediately."

Despite his anger, it wasn't the response he wanted. "Mother," he called to her, a bit remorseful, "don't go."

She opened the door anyway. "Notify me of how things end, if you wish," she said facetiously. "Perhaps by Facebook or text message." She left.

"MOTHER!" Leonard called. He rose from his chair, and started off behind her but Penny grabbed
his hand fiercely.

"If you leave me by myself to go after to her," Penny yelled, "I swear to God we will never have sex again."

He instantly turned around. "So like I was saying, honey: more ice chips?"

Amy, now subject to the will of her captor and restrained by a gun pressed into the back of her head, was seated in a chair at the kitchen. Her eyes were closed, and she sat perfectly still with both of her hands splayed across the dinner table. She could feel the weapon's muzzle pressing into the occipital bone of her skull. Lise-Marie hadn't said anything for several moments, but from her jerky movements, Amy was suddenly struck with the idea that this woman didn't even have a plan. One false move or stray comment and she may panic and lose control. Amy couldn't afford to die at the hands of a crazed lunatic. She had too much to lose.

"Please don't shoot me," Amy said, her voice calm and steady. "I have a family. I have two small children that need a mother."

"Harming you is not something I want to do," Lise-Marie said, from behind. "I simply need you to do me a small favor and need to know that you will comply."

Her audacity made Amy sick to her stomach.

"Sheldon and I are a single income family," Amy explained, "with a home, a vehicle and two children to care for." And thanks to you that income just got smaller, she thought. "We don't have any money."

"I fine that hard to believe," Lise-Marie said, glibly. "You have enough to buy a house. Surely you have a grand or two to spare."

"The bank rejected our loan," Amy said. "We aren't getting the house anymore." Hearing herself say the words out loud, on top of having the shittiest day of her life, felt like a stab in chest. She felt herself welling up a little. Lise-Marie was unsympathetic.

"If you aren't getting the house anymore, than you should have all that money you saved up sitting in an account somewhere." Amy took a deep breath: while the bulk of their money was tied into escrow, she was right; there was some money in their account. "All I am asking is that you give some of it to me. Here," she said.

Amy looked down and suddenly there was a computer tablet sitting on the table in front of her. It looked like it belonged to Sheldon. It had the same desktop picture of her and the kids at Halloween from the previous year, as well as Sheldon's desktop icons and apps.

"Where did you get this from?" Amy asked.

"It is mine," Lise-Marie said. "But if it looks familiar, it is because I copied Sheldon's 'environment' onto it, in preparation for just such an occasion. I am nothing if not prepared. So, now, all you have to do is—"

Just then, for the fifth time, Amy's phone rang. She could feel Lise-Marie shuffling behind her.

"Putain!" Lise-Marie cursed. Amy knew who it was.

"He's not going to stop calling until he gets me," Amy said. The statement enraged Lise-Marie and,
for the first time since the whole ordeal started, she started shouting.

"Good for you, Amy! You have a love story for the ages. Who gives a fuck!" she snarled. She tossed the phone onto the table, where it slid to the other side and well out of Amy's reach. Amy could hear Lise-Marie muttering under breath, "Ta gueule." Amy felt the gun pull away from the back of her head, and for a split second, she thought her captor might be breaking. Lise-Marie crouched next to Amy's face, and was suddenly breathing hard. It was the first time Amy had seen the other woman's face in long time. She looked more frantic than before. "He'll get to see you a lot sooner if you transfer the money."

"I keep telling you." Amy began, "we don't—" but Lise-Marie re-emerged with the gun and stuck it directly in Amy's face at point blank range.

"Make the transfer," she snarled.

Amy thought that being held up in this fashion—coming face to face with the pistol, staring at it, and gazing into its barrel—would frighten her, but instead, it did something else. It made her bolder. The tears and trembling faded and was replaced with a new resolve. She even had enough chutzpah to come up with a plan.

"You're right," she said. "I'll do anything for my freedom. I'll make the transfer," she said, her voice calm and steady.

Lise-Marie could visibly be seen calming down. "I already have the page loaded," she said. "Just enter your pin and routing numbers."

Amy took the tablet in her hands and began typing, then paused. "I have to talk to Sheldon first."

"Like hell you do," Lise-Marie said, almost laughing. "Maybe I will let you call the police while you're at it."

"If you don't let me call Sheldon, he's the one you'll have to worry about," Amy said. "He'll call the authorities for me."

"Amy, I swear to God, I'm losing my patience," Lise-Marie shouted, ever more agitated.

"In Sheldon's mind," Amy continued, boldly, "I'm missing, and whenever a change is made to the bank account, he gets a notification to his phone. Those two facts together are going to set off an alarm in his mind."

Lise-Marie shrugged, unmoved. "They'll be investigating for days. I'll be long gone by then."

"Of course, but if he alerts the bank, the money will be frozen until they clear it."

Lise-Marie closed her eyes and turned her head, supremely frustrated. She turned back to Amy, staring at her with a face that showed she didn't know whether to believe her or not. Amy could see her battling with herself, desperate and annoyed. "Fine," she said finally. "Call him. Tell him that you're making the transfer, but don't you dare alert him to anything. Do you understand me?"

Amy nodded, then reached out her hand.

"Hands down," Lise-Marie demanded. "I'll be making the call." Amy was disappointed, but not defeated. This could still work. Lise-Marie called Sheldon then held out the phone in front of Amy.

"Amy!" Sheldon said immediately. "I've been calling you for over an hour. I have important news
"You're on speaker," Amy said.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm... I'm driving," she said.

"That's what my mother said," he said. "I guess she was right after—"

"I can't talk, but I just left the gas station. I had to use the restroom and make a quick purchase. I needed to make a transfer in the bank account."

"What could you possibly purchase at the gas station that would require a transfer?" Sheldon asked, incredulous.

"Oh, I don't know," Amy said. "Just the usual. Gas." She steadied her nerves and fought not to look at Lise-Marie. "Hot cocoa."

There was a long silence on the other end. Lise-Marie looked at the phone and, confirming that they were still connected, made a gesture for Amy to wrap it up.

"Bye, Shelly," Amy said. "Love you."

"Amy?" he finally said.


"And then you'll let me go?" Amy asked.

Lise-Marie raised the gun again, pressing it into Amy's forehead. "Make the transfer."

Sheldon sat staring at his phone oddly. Mary looked up from reading the waiting room copy of *Our Daily Bread* and noticed Sheldon's face.

"Phone confusing you again?" she asked.

"Amy just called me 'Shelly'," he said.

"So what?" Mary said. "Everybody calls you Shelly."

"She doesn't. Plus, more alarmingly, she bought a hot cocoa."

"So?"

"We don't drink hot cocoa in months that don't end in R. It's in the Relationship Agreement."

"Well then somebody alert the authorities!" Mary said sarcastically. "We have a Swiss Miss emergency!"

Sheldon nodded his head. "Yes, we do. Gather the children, Mom," he said as he rose to his feet. "Amy's in trouble."
"So," the doctor said, observing the scene. "Have you picked out a name?"

Leonard lifted his head, smiling proudly. "In fact we have. Penelope Hope."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amy sat at the dinner table, the computer tablet in her left hand and her right finger poised to type in her pin and router numbers. She entered one digit, then another, but then stopped.

"What are you waiting for?" Lies-Marie asked, harried and frantic. It startled Amy, the aggression in her voice, and Amy began to doubt. Anyone watching the scene from afar would surely advise her to do the same thing: to type in the numbers, to transfer the money, to give the woman anything she wanted. To get away with her life.

Lise-Marie glanced down at the screen, searching for some reason why Amy sat frozen; in her distraction, the gun lowered just a bit. Amy gazed at the firearm, as it hovered just beyond her nose. She could see into the muzzle and down into the dark abyss. She could see the smooth surface of the barrel, the markings on the handle, the firm curves of the trigger—and Lise-Marie's fingers wrapped around it. The sight of it steeled her resolve. "Put in the fucking numbers!" Lise-Marie screamed.

Amy turned to her captor, her face calm but stern. "Why us?" she asked.

"You have ten seconds, Amy," Lise-Marie growled. "Do not try me. I have a lot less to lose than you do."

Amy was unmoved, her eyes steady, her gaze resolute. "We've never done anything to you."

"Nine."

"The only thing we're guilty of is being naïve enough to actually trust you."

"Eight."

The numbers came down, but as Amy spoke—recounting all she'd suffered—her volume and her anger rose. "For our troubles, all we've gotten in return is the chance to watch you take sadistic delight in making our lives a living hell."

"Welcome to my world," Lise-Marie said.

"But yours is a hell of your own making," Amy said. "You cheat. You lie. You steal. You manipulate. You con your way through every day of your life and then have the audacity to be too afraid to face the consequences."

"I'm not fucking playing with you Amy," Lise-Marie screamed. "Make the motherfucking
"You're a coward, Lise-Marie," she said. "A coward and bully. The same kind of bully that has tormented Sheldon and I all of our lives. You can only run for so long before it's going to catch up with you."

On the heels of the statement, there was the noise of movement coming from down the hall. Both women turned their heads to the sound. Amy suspected it was coming from her hallway closet.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Mind your own damn business and put in the pin number," Lise-Marie snarled.

After the slimmest moment of hesitation, Amy suddenly got up and raced for the closet. She leaned her head against the door. "Hello?" she said.

"Amy?" came a timid voice from inside. She recognized it was Joe, the maintenance man. She placed her hand on the doorknob, poised to turn it when she heard the loud sound of the cock of a gun. She turned and saw Lise-Marie standing in the middle of the floor, a few feet away. The gun was aimed for Amy. Lise-Marie looked altered and desperate.

"Two."

"AAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGG GGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG!" Penny yelled in a grisly howl that bellowed from the core of her gut. Leonard firmly gripped her hand with both of his own, and pressed his forehead against the hair on the side of her face, slick with sweat.

"You are doing so well," the doctor said, practically pleading. "You're almost there. Give me one more push, and you're done. Just one more."

It may have been just one more, but Penny was so, so tired. The thought of pushing even one more time seemed impossible. Leonard looked at her and could sense her fatigue.

"You are so amazing," he whispered in her ear. "You can do this."

"Okay," the doctor said. "On the count of three. One, two… three."

Penny, giving it all she had, pushed as hard as she could, squeezing the last of what energy remained and pulling from a reserve she didn't know she had. There was a pressure and then a release and, even before the doctor said anything, she already knew she'd done it. Immediately, however, without even a second in between, her mind switched from her private triumph to the small, shivering life at the foot of the bed. Both Penny and Leonard's heads craned upwards, and they waited with baited breath for what seemed like an eternity until, finally, they heard the sweet melody of the cries of their newborn infant. Overcome with emotions, they collapsed into each other, giving way to tears.

"So dad," the nurse said, "you want to do the honors?"

Leonard snuck a finger under his glasses, wiping away a stray tear, and then turned to Penny and, after a quick kiss, took the instrument from the nurse's hand and cut the umbilical cord. They rushed the baby over to Penny, gently placing the blanket-bundled newborn on her belly. Leonard and Penny sat, wide-eyed and speechless, in silent awe.
"So," the doctor said, observing the scene. "Have you picked out a name?"

Leonard lifted his head, smiling proudly. "In fact we have. Penelope Hope."

The doctor nodded once, pursing his lips. "Hmm," he said. "Interesting name."

Raj was sitting alone in the waiting room, staring up at the television mounted on the wall and watching an infomercial on weight loss pills.

"This might finally be the breakthrough I've been waiting for," he whispered to himself.

Just then the doctor walked into the waiting room. He looked around, confused.

"The Hofstadters told me there would be someone here waiting for them."

Raj stood up. "Yeah, that's me," he said brightly.

"They seemed to indicate there would be more people," Dr. Harper said.

Raj shrugged. "Well, it's just me."

"Fine," the doctor said. "At any rate, she had the baby." He turned to leave.

"That's it?!" Raj said. The doctor stopped, turning around. "No birth weight, no length, no comment on the flecks of color in those cherubic eyes?"

"Oh," the doctor said. "Um, well, the baby weighs eight pounds two ounces, is 19 inches long and has light brown eyes."

Raj sighed wistfully. "I bet she's beautiful."

"She?" the doctor said. "It's a boy."

Sheldon was sitting shotgun beside his mother in her rental car while the twins fidgeted in the backseat. They hadn't eaten in hours, and Sheldon had been forced to bribe them with a couple bags of Doritos from the vending machine and a future trip to McDonald's just to get Aditi to stop crying. The children were only a few chips in, though, and his conscience was already bothering him. Time was of the essence; he didn't even have a moment to stop for a meal.

"Okay, Shelly," Mary said, after turning off the engine. At Sheldon's insistence, they were parked at least two blocks from his apartment building. "I'm trying to understand, but this whole thing is a bit far-fetched. You're saying that, just because Amy used the facilities at a gas station, you think some Swedish woman abducted—"

"SHHHHHH!" Sheldon said, his finger over his mouth. He glanced back nervously at the twins. They were preoccupied with trying to steal chips out of each other's bags.

"Sorry," she said, talking quieter.

"We never use gas station restrooms," Sheldon explained.

"Let me guess," Mary said. "It's in the Relationship Agreement."

"No," Sheldon said, sitting up erect. "It's just disgusting."
"That doesn't mean that…” Mary caught herself and paused, looking back at the twins. She spoke more softly. "That doesn't mean something bad happened."

Sheldon shook his head unconvinced. "There were just too many anomalies. I feel like she was trying to tell me that something is wrong."

"Yeah," Mary said with a chuckle, "that y'all have too many rules and it's time to start breaking them."

"Even so, I won't have peace of mind until I'm sure," he said. He turned around, looking out of the back window. "The cops should be on their way." At that moment the first sirens could be heard rounding the corner. Sheldon opened the door and went to get out, but his mother touched his arm, stopping him. He turned around.

"Be careful, Shelly," she said, the first bit of fear in her voice.

Sheldon just nodded, and then left.

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Amy stood in front of the hallway closet door, her eyes locked with Lise-Marie's and her hand positioned on the knob.

"Step away from the door," Lise-Marie demanded. Amy didn't move. "STEP AWAY FROM THE DOOR!" Startled, Amy pulled her arms away, holding them out at her sides. Lise-Marie regarded Amy with cold fury, and then took a single step forward. She began to speak, drawing closer with each word and her pistol leading the way on the end of an outstretched arm. "I am not sure what action film you have running through you mind right now," she said, "but this is not the time to play the heroine. If you think I am incapable of coming through on my promises, you will find that you are wrong in the sorest way."

Amy looked her captor dead in the eye, and uttered the words that would set her free. "Shoot me."


Amy walked right up to her, placing her hands on the gun. Lise-Marie made an attempt at struggling, but weakly; Amy didn't let go. "You and I both know this gun isn't real," she said calmly. She could Lise-Marie's façade dissolve before her eyes. With a final tug, Amy took the "weapon" from Lise-Marie's hands.

Lise-Marie's posture sank, and she lowered her head into the palms of her hands, defeated. A tear ran down her cheek, and she weeped silently into her hands.

"You aren't a killer," Amy said. "You're just a bitch."

Lise-Marie looked up, upset and perversely ashamed that the statement was true. She gritted her teeth, angry.

"You don't even realize I did you a favor," she said.

The statement was so absurd, it knocked the wind from Amy's lungs. "You lie so much," she whispered, "that you have lost your ability to discern what the truth is anymore."
"Don't you see?" Lise Marie said, still teary, but feisty. "If you had just let us get married, we all would have won. Sheldon would have gotten his prize, you would have gotten your house and the glory of being with a renowned scientist, and I would have gotten the one thing I've always wanted: a little respect."

"That's the part you don't understand," Amy said. "One day, Sheldon will get his prize, I will get my house, and with all due respect and deepest affection for Sheldon, I already am a renowned scientist. But you will never get the respect you want. Not like this."

Lise Marie was left silent by the rejoinder, and she turned her face away.

The sound of sirens suddenly blared through the neighborhood. Police sirens. Not just one but several, and instead of passing by, their sound grew stronger and seemed to be settling around the building.

"What's that?" Lise-Marie said, wide-eyed and flushed with alarm.

Amy ran to the window and looked down below. The street was ablaze with the flashing lights of both local and federal law enforcement. She could feel the corners of her lips pulling into a smile. "He came for me," she whispered to herself, grinning. She turned back around when she heard the front door open and shut.

Lise-Marie was gone.

Amy ran to the closet and opened the door. Joe was inside, his hands and feet bound with Aditi's Hello Kitty duct tape. Amy shook her head, mortified.

"Thank you," he said, as she helped set him free. They both raced to the front door and out into the hallway. Joe bolted for the stairs, but paused when Amy lingered by the door. "You coming?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, in near disbelief at finally being free again. "Let's get out of here."

Sheldon ran the few blocks to his apartment building as fast as he could and still the federal agents beat him there. Upon approaching the edifice, he looked around at the swarm of cops, agents and even a paramedic or two. He could only think one thing: I hope I'm not too late.

After surveying the scene, he rushed for the front door, eager to go inside, but was stopped by an official-looking, suit-clad man who was toting a badge.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said to Sheldon. "We're currently trying to evacuate the building and no one else is permitted inside. We have reason to believe—"

"I KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE!" Sheldon shouted. "I'm the one who called. "My…" he struggled for the word, "My Amy's up there."

"I'm not sure who Amy is," the agent replied, "but I'm sure she'll be escorted down with the rest of the tenants."

"Amy is the one who's been abducted," Sheldon explained impatiently.

"Even more reason for you to wait until the matter is addressed by trained personnel. An eye-witness reported seeing the suspect with a handgun, so she is currently considered to be armed and dangerous."
Upon hearing that terrifying detail, Sheldon flew into abject panic and tried to get past the man, but the agent physically restrained him. Another officer drew close, prepared to back the agent up. Sheldon resisted the man, writhing against all efforts to be held back.

"Sir," the agent said, his voice taking on a more official tone. "You have to control yourself."

"Do I?" Sheldon replied in utter disgust. "The 'perpetrator' in question would be ruled certifiably insane by even the most lenient psychiatric body," he screamed, "and if you think I'm going to wait down here while she's doing God-knows-what to the mother of my children, then your police academy training has failed you in ways beyond what I would have originally imagined."

"That's it," the other officer said, and grabbed Sheldon, forcibly turning him around and pushing him, face-first, against a nearby fence.

"What are you doing?!" Sheldon yelled.

"Putting you in handcuffs," the officer said. He clapped restraints on Sheldon's bare wrists.

"Fine time to start enforcing the law," Sheldon said.

"Save it," the cop replied, and walked a very disgruntled Sheldon over to the curb, coercing him to sit down.

Sheldon bit his bottom lip and formulated an escape plan when gasps rang out through the crowd stirring around. He turned around, in the direction of the commotion and could barely believe his eyes.

It was Amy.

She was standing next to some of the officers by the building. They were all talking to her, but she was looking around, her eyes darting back and forth, and Sheldon knew who she was looking for. He bolted from the curb, his arms bound behind his back.

"HEY!" an officer called after him as he fled, but he kept running, and finally, when Amy spotted him, she took off too, running as fast as her legs would carry her to the man she longed to be with more than any other. When they reached each other, there was that first moment of inaction, that wondrous second when they just gazed at each other, basking in the glory of being together again. Amy brought her hands to his face, confirming that he was real, that he was here with her. Sheldon lowered his head, pressing his face into her shoulder. Relief—profound relief—and joy flooded his entire being. Amy nuzzled her head against the side of his face, breathing in his warm scent that was so comforting and familiar, and yet it felt so thrilling, as if it were the first time they had been so close like this, skin against skin. For the first time since the whole ordeal had begun, she felt safe. She longed for his embrace and tugged at his arms; it was then that she noticed his wrists were bound.

"What's this?" she said, looking around behind him.

"They stopped me from coming to get you," he said.

She smiled at the confession. "I knew you would come for me," she whispered. "I knew it."

He nodded once, his eyes devotedly trained on hers. A thought crossed his mind. "Was she awful?" he asked.

Amy ignored the question. "Where are the children?" she asked.
"With my mom," he answered.

"Good," she said, her voice almost breaking. "I'm ready to go."

The words set off something in Sheldon's mind. He swallowed hard, and was suddenly compelled by pressing urge. "Amy," he began, almost trembling, "there isn't room for anyone else."

"I drove here," she said. "I can follow her in our car."

Sheldon shook his head and went to touch her, but was stopped by the handcuffs. Amy realized she'd misunderstood.

"You are fundamental to what our family is, intricately intertwined into our very existence. There's no room for anyone else."

She nodded heartily. "I feel the same way about you Sheldon," she said.

"We need you forever," he said. "I need you forever. We can't ever leave room for anyone else."

He paused. "I will never, ever leave room for anyone else."

Amy saw the longing in his eyes, the urgency in his voice. This wasn't an apology or even a declaration. This was something higher, loftier, more sacred. This was a promise. Pulling herself up, bright-eyed and full, she brought her lips to his mouth, kissing him fervently and delighting in the feel of his lips tugging on her own.

It was at that very moment that Lise-Marie exited the building—disheveled, handcuffed and straddled by two FBI agents—and walked down the path as if in slow motion, passing the reunited couple on her way to a cop car… and her captivity. As Amy pulled away from the kiss, she could see out of the corner of her eye the despondent look of dejection on the other woman's face, a dejection made crueler by the proof of her failure so brilliantly on display. An officer opened the door to the vehicle, and with one hand on the top of her head and another on the door, an agent pushed her into the car.

Another agent approached Amy. "Are you Ms. Fowler?" he asked.

Amy nodded.

The agent sighed. "I know you're still getting yourself together, but would you be so kind as to come down to the station? We'll need to take your statement and ask a few questions."

"Do I have a choice?" Amy asked.

He shook his head.

"Fine then," Amy said, turning back to Sheldon. "But only if you take off his handcuffs."

"Oh… sure," the agent said, looking around for a cop. "I'll see what I can do." He jogged off.

"Come with me to the station," Amy pleaded.

Sheldon shook his head, then glanced up at the clock on the building across the street. Time was ticking.

"I can't," he said. "There's something I have to do."
Penny had had many longings in her life. For example, the longing to date the hottest guys, to be a famous actress, to have a better relationship with her brother and, once upon a time, to be a natural blonde. Over the years, she'd invested a lot of energy, money and even an occasional sleepless night into them all, only to often find the results to be unrewarding or disappointing. There was one longing, though, that Penny had wanted more than all others: to be a mother. Even though she was only a half hour in, it was already shaping up to be one of the most fantastic experiences of her life. She'd been living with this small person inside of her for nine months, but cradling the young boy in her arms—as Leonard stood beside her, looking on fondly as they began their new lives as parents—was a thrill she'd never known. It was a sensation that was so consuming, it blocked out everything else and almost made her feel like they were the only people in the world.

Then Raj sneezed.

He sat up suddenly, covering his nose and mouth with both hands, horrified. Popping up from where he had been sitting, he rushed over to the sink, frantically washing his hands. As the water ran, Penny leaned into Leonard's ear.

"This is exactly why I didn't want anyone to come into the room so soon," she whispered. "We've come too far for the baby to die of snot germs."

"The baby isn't going to die," Leonard whispered back, reassuringly. "Besides, I know we agreed to have no visitors until we got to the post-partum room, but the doctor said that Raj was out there all by himself. I felt sorry for him."

Simultaneously, they both looked over at him. He was scrubbing up with soap, sudsy up to his elbows, when he seemed to be pleasantly charmed with a yellow sponge shaped like a rubber ducky.

"He's just so excited by the whole thing," Penny said wistfully, then looked down again the baby, rocking him gently in her arms. "At least somebody cares."

"Hey," Leonard said, alarmed at the trace of sadness in her voice. "What does that mean? Tons of people care."

"Yeah?" Penny said, doubt in her voice. "When Amy gave birth, half of the West Coast and Southeast turned out." Penny kind of turned her lip to the side. "I still can't believe nobody showed up."

"Actually, Raj did," Leonard said.

"Which would be a lot more encouraging if he could actually talk me," Penny said.

"It's been a weird day," Leonard reasoned, placing a tender hand on her arm. "The Wolowtizes are with Howard's mom, we threw my mom out, your dad's flying in next week, and," Leonard paused a moment, his brow furrowed. He called out to Raj, who was admiring with wonder the tiny little instruments next to the baby scale as he dried his hands on a paper towel. "Where are Sheldon and Amy?"

Raj looked up, equally pensive, and then shrugged.

"That's fine," Penny said. "We can do this on our own. You, me..." She looked over at Raj. "And him."

Raj started searching around the room hastily, finally spotting a notepad. Pulling a pen from his jacket, he scribbled on the paper, and then held it up. Leonard squinted at the notepad, reading
slowly.

"Can I be the godfather?" it read. Leonard looked at Penny, then Penny looked at Raj. Raj looked on with baited breath for a reply.

"Not my first choice," she said, but then gave the man a jolly nod, "but, sure. If you show up, you get to play."

Raj responded with a toothy grin, rocking a little contentedly. Penny, however, looked anything but cheery.

Leonard sat next to her on the bed. "Don't worry about anything, Penny," he said. "Remember what we talked about a while back? As long as we love each other and this baby and never lose sight of the important things, we'll have everything we'll ever need right here." He brushed his hand against her hair tenderly. She smiled softly, comforted.

"You're absolutely right," she said. She looked down at the living, breathing marvel in her arms, flooded with wonder. Being a mother, and a mother alongside Leonard, felt more miraculous than anything she had ever imagined. It was a love so profound it seemed to seep into every crevice of her being, spilling out through her pores… and her eyes. A couple tears ran down her cheek. "I don't even know why I'm worrying," she said, a determined smile crossing her face. "Our baby is perfect."

Leonard nodded and watched his son in amazement. He tucked his pinky into the newborn's curled fingers, and the baby boy squeezed it back. "I can't believe we have a son," he said, breathless with joy.

"I know!" Penny said, laughing a little through her tears. "What are we going to do with all those dresses?"

"And pink paint?"

"And Barbie bibs?"

Leonard looked at her with terror.

"What?" she said.

"And a name," he groaned. Penny, however, looked back down at her infant, smiling.

"I have the perfect name," she said.

Leonard raised one eyebrow, cautiously optimistic. "Alright," he said. "Let's hear it."

"Well, a wise man once told me that a great way to name your child is by thinking of someone you truly admire."

Leonard thought back to their conversation that day in the apartment. It sounded like good place to start.

"Who did you have in mind?" he asked.

"How about Leonard?" she said, grinning. She looked up from her baby's face and into her husband's eyes. "Just like his father."

Leonard was surprised… and a little hesitant. "Are you sure?"
"Of course I am," she said, her whole face alight with confident joyfulness. "As sure as anything I've ever been in my life," she said confidently. "I love you, so much. More than you know."

Leonard nodded, deeply touched and warming to the idea. "Alright," he said. "It's Leonard then." His smile widened and his chest rose with pride as he took the name for a test drive. "Leonard. Like his father. Like me."

Penny nodded, positively beaming.

Leonard tried out the complete name with an official air. "Leonard Leakey Hofstadter, Jr."

Penny's face twisted into a grimace. "Um, sweetie?" she said.

"Yeah?" Leonard replied.

"No offense, but we might have to go back to the drawing board on the middle name."

He immediately agreed. "Yep," he said. "Absolutely. With any luck, maybe we can get this Leonard out of diapers before he enters high school."

Penny laughed, and stroked Baby Leonard's cheek.

With sore wrists and tired legs, Sheldon made the furious journey across town from the Western Union in Pasadena on Adelman Street to his bank. Worse, since he had been prohibited from entering the apartment building, he was making the journey without any of his standard safety equipment, and more than once he'd come dangerously close to having a bad-mannered driver leave his innards sprayed across the road.

Soon enough, Sheldon pulled up to his bank, hurriedly chained his bike to the bike rack, then raced for the door. He was positively stunned when it didn't pull open. He looked down at his watch; it was only 5:53, meaning he still had seven minutes before the bank closed. He pressed his face against the glass, hoping for a miracle.

"I'm just praying that Shelly and Amy get back here in one piece," Mary said, cradling the newborn in her arms. "This has truly been a day of highs and lows, and I won't be happy until we're all back together as a family."

"None of us will be," Penny said, still reeling from Mary's account of events.

Leonard walked over, bringing her a cup of Jell-O, which she ate heartily. They were settling into their new surroundings, and the stark, sterile white of the delivery room had been replaced with the much cozier atmosphere of the postpartum room. There was a delicate painting of a mother and her infant on the wall. A green ceramic lamp, adorned with hand-painted clowns, sat on a table. The light was soft and comforting. But most of all, Leonard and Penny's tribe of well-wishers were making their way back.

"What I don't understand," Bernadette said, "is how a woman with such constant and explosive bowel distress can have a flawless colonoscopy." She shook her head. "I mean, I would hate for her to have colon cancer or," she shuddered, "Crohn's disease, but… really? Perfect? Not even one polyp?"

"I've been telling you for years that it's all in her head," Howard said. "That, and the idea that bureka meat pies count as a vegetable just because they have pine nuts."
Leonard and Penny took a sweeping look at their gathered guests as Adam walked by, twirling the head on a Batman figurine.

"See," Leonard whispered to Penny, "I told you they cared."

She smiled. "I know, I know. I just got weird for a second."

Leonard was rubbing her arm affectionately when his phone started buzzing. He grabbed it. "Penny, look," he said and held the phone so she could see. "Darlene wants to FaceTime with us."

Penny sat up some, gathering herself, while Leonard connected, hushing the crowd in the room. Mary brought the baby back to Penny.

"Hi, Mom," Penny said, smiling from ear to ear.

"Hi Darlene!" Leonard said, tucking his head into the shot.

"Hi there, guys! Let me see that grandbaby of mine!" Darlene said excitedly. Leonard turned the phone to the baby. Darlene squealed excitedly. "Looks just like me. A real looker."

"How'd you know the baby had been born?" Penny asked.

"Some guy named Raj tweeted it and Scooter saw it and he told me."

Raj held up the notepad again. It said, "Kick-ass godfather."

"That's great, Mom!" Penny said. "Thanks for checking in."

"I wouldn't think of doing different. How's Mom?"

"A little sore, but I'm okay," Penny said.

"And little Penelope?"

"Um, that's the thing," Leonard said. "Turns out Penelope… is a boy."

"Well I'll be damned," Darlene said. She shook her head. "Some of those babies are tuckers. You never really know what you're going to get until it comes out." She moved her head. "Lemme see him again."

Leonard moved the phone so she could look at her new grandchild. "Dear Lord, he is beautiful," she said, breathless. "Congratulations, guys," she said.

Penny smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Leonard got up to answer it. "That's probably Amy," he said. When he opened it, it was a man holding a clipboard.

"Leonard Hofstadter?" he asked.

"Um, yeah, I'm Leonard Hofstadter."

"Cool," the man said. A second later, in walked four women who were dressed in the instantly recognizable costumes of Sally Ride, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Queen Elizabeth I and Cinderella. They walked to the front of the room and, after doing a key check, launched into singing the first verse of "Isn't She Lovely," by Stevie Wonder.
"Lemme see, lemmsee!" Darlene yelled, and Leonard turned the phone towards the front of the room. As the women sang, Penny, Leonard, Raj and Darlene watched on with a mix of awe, amusement and disbelief. When they were done, Cinderella walked over to the bed and handed Penny a bouquet of roses. Leonard caught Raj dabbing the corner of his eye. Then, just as suddenly as they'd come, they left.

The clipboard-wielding man, who was also smacking on gum, pushed a form towards Leonard. "Please sign here, sir, to say we delivered the song."

Leonard picked up the pen and signed. "Who, exactly, was it from?" he asked.

The man looked down at his clipboard. "Says here, 'With fond wishes. Grandmother.'"

Penny's face lit up. "Thanks, Mom!" she said into the phone.

"Wasn't me, sweetie," Darlene said. "I've never seen anything like that in my life."

"Then who was it?" Leonard said. His head snapped to Penny and they looked at each other, bug-eyed and stunned. They shouted out the same thing in unison.

"BEVERLY!"

Leonard waited as the phone rang, worried that his mother might already be somewhere 10,000 feet in the air. He was caught off guard when she answered the phone.

"Hello, Mother," Leonard said sheepishly into the phone.

"Hello, Leonard," Beverly said. The conversation was tense.

"Um, we got the singing telegram."

"Was Ruth Bader Ginsberg included? I insisted they include prominent female role models."

"Yep," Leonard said nodding. "Ruth was able to make it, but… where did Cinderella come from?"

"Her inclusion was unfortunate, but four custom characters proved to be prohibitive in cost."


"Did you like it?"

"We loved it," Leonard said, finally relaxing, and a smile was in his voice. "Penny noticed the maracas in the shape of gavel. Really creative."

"Good."

There was an even longer pause, but Leonard could almost hear the sound of his mother formulating a bit of scathing criticism. Instead she was almost timid when she did speak.

"How does she look?" she asked softly. The faintest thrill could be heard in her voice.

"The thing is, Mother, it turns out that Penny and I… we had a boy."

Her previous cheer was replaced by a stiff sigh.
"Of course the one time I make a grand gesture, my efforts would be thwarted by a case of prenatal penile shame."

"We still really appreciated it, Mother. It's the thought that counts." He took a deep breath, gathering his nerve. "To tell you the truth, I called to apologize. We had no idea that's what you were up to. I know you're on your way back to New Jersey but maybe later on we could Skype or —"

"Leonard," she interrupted, her voice uncharacteristically small. "I'm downstairs in the hospital lobby."

Leonard was shocked—and excited. "You are?"

His voice was too excited; she began to retreat. "Well, you didn't expect me to waste a perfectly good hospital parking voucher, now did you?"

Leonard shook his head, smiling to himself. "No. We'll see you in a few minutes." He went to hang up then shouted into the phone. "Mother, WAIT!"

"Yes, Leonard?" she said.

"We decided to name your grandson after his father: Leonard Hofstadter."

"I know what your name is," Beverly said impatiently, "although, with your persistent inferiority complex and tendency to be a regressive in your masculinity, I am surprised that you decided to make him a junior."

"It was Penny's idea."

"Of course it was."

In light of recent events, Leonard was feeling generous enough to divulge a little secret.

"You know, I think I can tell you this now," he said, a chuckle in his voice, "but for a brief while there, we were considering naming her Beverly."

"Oh, thank goodness you didn't," Beverly said. "She just would have grown up to be cold-hearted bitch."

After arriving to the hospital, Amy had been disappointed to discover that she'd missed the birth, only to then be flabbergasted to learn that the most recent arrival to the Hofstadter family carried a Y chromosome. However, once she arrived at the hospital from the police station, she barely had time to process her surprise before being hit with a battery of inquiries into her own death-defying day.

"How did you know the gun was a fake?" Leonard asked as he rocked the baby. He was seated beside Penny, who was fast asleep.

Amy, for her part, sat in a lounger several feet away, with each of her children on her lap, clutching Happy Meal toys and sound asleep. Bernadette and Howard were fortunate enough to be sharing lap duty, as each of their boys, too, had fallen into a deep slumber. Amy spoke softly as she answered.

"I'd seen one like it before. Lise-Marie confessed to authorities that she'd found it in the back seat
of the car she'd stolen. It was the very model that Sheldon's brother bought Robert for his fourth birthday, with the enclosed note to 'Shoot 'em dead.' Needless to say, it never made it to my son's hands. In fact, I didn't know it wasn't real until I took the weapon to a gun exchange at the local police station. The officer laughed at me for over three minutes before he told me it was a toy."

"That was rude," Bernadette said.

"That wasn't the worst part. He pretended to book me and made me take a mug shot photo and fingerprints, then told me it wasn't real either. I was the laughing stock of the precinct."

"Well we're just glad to have you back with us, Amy," Howard said.

"Indeed we are," Mary agreed. "Even if you did disrespect Junior's gift." She was a little miffed.

"Well, all the same, thanks guys," Amy replied. She knotted up her face, thinking deeply. "It's still rather shocking that the erstwhile Baby Penelope is now Baby Leonard." She shook her head with a click of her tongue. "I guess I'm just going to have to take back the walker I bought for her, er... him."

"Well, just because he's a boy doesn't mean he won't learn how to walk," Leonard pointed out.

"Oh, I know," Amy said, "but this particular walker was designed to promote Kegel exercises in pre-ambulatory infants. You would be amazed at its untold benefits to female toddlers in the area of bladder control. The benefit in future sexual function, however, is still being determined." Raj's face was pulled into a nauseated scowl at that bit of information. She just shrugged. "I'll take it back for something else."

As if he himself was disturbed by the conundrum, the baby began to cry in the bleating way that newborns do. He was tucked in his grandmother's arms, though she bore him with her characteristic stiffness.

"I'll take him," Penny said immediately, heading off a meltdown.

"No need," Beverly said. She cleared her throat loudly, then leaned over the fussy infant. "Goo goo, gaga, sweepy weepy baby," she said. "Gwamma has you." Baby Leonard gave a final sniffle then stopped crying.

The whole room was, in a word, dumbfounded.

"Who the hell are you and what did you do with my mother?" Leonard asked.

"I haven't a clue what you mean," she said, glibly.

"Really?" Leonard said. "Since when did you get all warm fuzzy and 'goo goo gaga'?"

"It's absolutely natural," she explained, "if not characteristic, for a grandmother to make an effort to vocalize with her grandchild in a way that will promote the development of infantile language skills while fostering familial primal bonding urges." She looked at him with weary aloofness. "As a scientist, I thought you recognize that, Leonard."

"It's also totally natural for a mother to show her own child a little affection, Mother."

She sighed. "Needy baby, greedy baby. Does your lingering oedipal complex know no bounds?" She turned to her daughter-in-law. "Do be careful, Penny. He may show some hostility to the baby in a jealous vie for your attention. It's a common phenomenon among men of his emotional make-
On the heels of the statement, the screech of creaking hinges punctured the air. Everyone's head turned to the source of the sound. Emerging from behind the door was Sheldon.

"Sheldon!" Amy called, attempting to stand. The children, freshly awake, slipped from her lap and toddled over to their father on wobbly feet, groggily clutching his legs. However, he barely responded to their embrace, his eyes were so fixed on Amy. They stared at each other silently, intently, and it soon became apparent to everyone that a moment was passing between them. "Did you make it to the bank?" Amy asked, her voice small and anxious.

"I did," he said. He reached into his jacket and emerged with a small white box. Easing between the two children, he advanced to Amy and handed it to her. She stared at, wincing, almost afraid to take it in her hands.

"Don't tell me these are the keys to the house," she said, so excited she could hardly breathe.

"Open it," Sheldon said.

After taking a moment to collect herself—and a deep breath, lest she should faint—she opened the box.

She stared at the object in patent disbelief.

"What is it?" Mary asked, taking a few halting steps towards Amy. Bernadette and Raj clung to each other, beside themselves with anticipation. Even Penny and Leonard watched on with lips parted in expectation.

"What is this, Sheldon?" Amy asked, breathless. She reached into the box and pulled out a sparkling diamond on a gold ring setting. Penny let out a loud squeal before covering her mouth.

Instead of answering, Sheldon took the box from her, setting it to the side. Then he took her hand and dropped to the floor on bended knee.

"Amy Farrah Fowler," he said. "Would you make me the happiest man in the world and accept my proposal of marriage?"

Like the gush of faucet, tears ran down Amy's face and she nodded vigorously. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I will marry you."

At the affirmative response he'd so eagerly awaited, Sheldon stood up and planted Amy with a passionate kiss. Cries, applause and tears erupted throughout the room. Howard snatched a Kleenex from a nearby box and, without looking, handed one to Raj, who immediately set to drying his eyes. Aditi, who was leaning against the bed, exploded into giggles.

"Mommy and Daddy were kissing," she said.

Mary clasped her hands together, absolutely euphoric. "Praise the Lord, Hallelujah!" she cried.

Robert tugged on her dress hem. "What's happening?" he asked.

Mary bent down, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Your momma and daddy are getting married, that's what."

Aditi walked over. "Is that when you get to wear a pretty dress and hold flowers?" she asked.
"Yep," Amy said, joining the conversation, with Sheldon in hand.

"Can I wear a pretty dress too?" Aditi asked.

"Of course," Amy replied. She bent down and, without letting Sheldon go, picked up Aditi in her other arm. "You can wear a dress that matches Mommy's."

Aditi gasped, elated. "I know! I want a green one with yellow polka dots."

Robert was not quite as excited. "Do I have to dress up too?" he asked dejectedly.

"Unfortunately, yes," Sheldon answered. He scooped up Robert with his free arm.

"Can I wear my Batman nightcap?"

Amy laughed. "Of course not."

"That's the most rational thing I've heard yet," Sheldon muttered.

Mary gently poked Amy's arm as she drew closer. "I was praying for y'all, Amy."

Amy nodded. "Thank you, Mary."

"And I swear the Lord outdoes himself sometimes."

"Assuming there is a God," Sheldon said, "He would be, by definition, all-powerful and thus incapable of 'outdoing' himself."

"Trust me; with that mouth you got on you, God outdoes himself every time I don't sock you in the jaw."

"Grandma?"

She looked down to find her grandson staring up at her. "Are you going to hit Dad?"

She placed a hand on his head. "Of course not, sugar plum. He's my son and I love him very much."

"Good," Robert said, and resumed moving his Happy Meal Toy through the air like an airplane.

All this wedding business taught Penny a very hard lesson: never get fitted for a dress while you're breastfeeding.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK MOMENT: Danny’s Song – Kenny Loggins
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

"So I guess no one's up for going with me to the club."

Ding.

The elevator doors opened and Sheldon, Amy, Robert, Aditi and Mary hobbled into the suspended chamber silently, all of them absolutely exhausted after surviving what would no doubt go down as the most grueling day of their lives. Even so, behind their tired faces, there was a stirring of contentment inside. The day had not been without its joys.

Before leaving the station, the policemen had told Amy that Lise-Marie made a full confession and that—considering that the forensic evidence related to the case was minimal—the apartment had been cleared for Amy to enter into once again. She'd been appreciative of that news at the time, but later that night, while she stared into the place that had been her prison only a few short hours prior, she had told Sheldon that they would have to spend the night somewhere else. They'd packed up a few, well, a lot of things, and then they'd all piled back into their vehicles and made their way to the nearby Fairfield Inn.

Their drowsy eyes drooped, their heavy shoulders sagged, and weary feet shuffled into the elevator. Amy carried two large duffle bags on her right shoulder and was holding Robert's hand with her left. Mary held a box under one arm and pulled rolling luggage behind her that dangled from tired fingers. Both twins were strapped to backpacks chockfull of more toys (and less practical items) than was reasonable. And finally Sheldon was burdened down with no less than three totes, two purses, one rolling cooler…

And a sleeping Aditi.

"Robert, sweetie, push the five," Mary said. Her grandson did so. There was a quiet swoosh and up they went. A second later there was another ding. When the door opened, Robert stumbled out.

"This is not our floor, dear," Amy said. Like a drunken sailor, he wordlessly turned around and stumbled back in. A young man followed him inside.

"What a group," he said, too jolly for their fatigued ears. He snuggled in where he could find a spot as the door closed. "You guys look tired."

"A master of the obvious," Sheldon mumbled.

"So I guess no one's up for going with me to the club," he said. He elbowed Mary playfully. "It's Lady's Night."

"Heavens no," she said. "I'm afraid you're forty years too late."

The man chuckled.

Ding.
All heads looked up. They were on their floor. The doors opened and everyone but the young man piled out.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," they all mumbled in unison.

They made their way down the hall, scanning the doors as they walked, and stopped in front of rooms 518 and 520.

"Here we are," Amy said. She went to hand Mary a card key, but with full hands, but Mary gestured for Amy to stuff in pocket on her sweater, as both of her hands were full. Amy did so. "You sure you don't mind the twins sleeping in your room?" she asked Mary.

"Not at all," Mary insisted. "Nothing would bring me greater pleasure."

"They have a tendency to migrate to the bed in the middle of the night," Amy warned.

"Which would be a welcomed treat," Mary said.

Amy smiled. She dropped all of her stuff on the floor outside of her room and stooped down in front of Robert. He was rubbing his eye.

"Good night, Robert," she said. "Sleep tight, okay?" She held out her arms.

He nodded and walked forward into her embrace. "Goodnight," he said.

She stood, looking at her daughter. She was dead asleep. Amy smoothed down the hair the back of her head.

"I'm going to go and put her down," Sheldon said, having already made a pile in front of the door with his own cargo. Amy nodded. Then Sheldon took Robert's hand and they followed Mary inside.

Amy went into the adjoining room and, one by one, lifted or dragged all the bags inside. She made a pile of it all in front of the room's obligatory desk. Reflecting on the events of the day, she was determined to focus on the good and push the bad to the back of her mind. When she was done stacking their items, she climbed onto the bed, crawling to the pillow and collapsing onto it head first.

It felt fantastic to be lying down. Without even pulling back the sheets, she snuggled in, tucking her hands under her head. She could feel her engagement ring press into her cheek, and was filled with a little thrill. She closed her eyes, determined to sleep—and with her level of fatigue, it shouldn't have required much determination at all. However, much like the daughter she loved so much, with nighttime came the monsters: unsettling thoughts of being a victim, of being angry, and of being very, very afraid. The only thing worse than thinking about what actually happened was thinking about the "what ifs": What if she had been wrong? What if the gun had been real? What if Sheldon hadn't understood her coded call for help?

Lying there, even though she knew her family was just beyond the wall, just beyond the adjoining door, she felt intensely alone and frightened, as if she were the only one left in the world. Her pillow felt less like a sanctuary and more like a hiding place. She heard the door open and shut.

"Are you asleep, Amy?"
"No," she answered. She thought her voice sounded weak. Then she heard the shuffle of feet and the shuffle of rustling bags. The sounds seemed to get more urgent and impatient. Moments later, they stopped.

"Do you think it would be very awful if I slept in what I am currently wearing?"

"No," Amy said. She hadn't bothered changing at all. "Come to bed."

She could hear him changing out of his pants and T-shirt, and she took the opportunity to shed her skirt and blouses as well, tossing them to the floor beside her bed. A few moments later, she felt his weight beside her on the mattress. She groped beside herself, then drew closer, nestling in next to his body. She felt his arm wrap around her. She sighed once, contently. Her anxiety was fading and was being replaced with a warm feeling of serenity.

"Amy, I have some news," he said.

"More news?" she said with a whimper. "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

There was a pause. "I imagine it can."

She put her head on his chest. It was almost as if she couldn't get too close.

He spoke again. "You aren't upset with me?" he asked.

The question was unexpected.

"No. I'm not upset," she said. "Why would I be?"

She could feel Sheldon's body squirm a little. "I thought you might have attributed some of today's considerable suffering to me."

"Oh," Amy said, with renewed understanding. "It's not your fault. There is no way you could have ever foreseen—" Her statement was interrupted by a protracted yawn. "I could never blame you for that."

"Are you happy to be with me, Amy?" he asked. The question echoed from what felt like another time.

She looked up at him in the dark. He was facing towards the ceiling. "Yes, I am," she answered. "Do you know why?"

He looked down at her. "Why?"

"Because I feel very, very loved. More loved than I have in my entire life."

Satisfied, he took a calming breath and his body relaxed again, becoming tranquil. He closed his eyes. Reaching back, she turned off the lamp once again, and then she took her previous place pressed against his body.

They stayed that way even after they fell asleep.

Morning time brought light and, with it, lighter moods. Amy had pulled herself into a cozy ball and lay on her side, cocooned warmly under the covers and facing Sheldon. Sheldon lay on his back, his eyes closed.
"Tell me the story again," she pleaded merrily.

Sheldon sighed impatiently, and turned to Amy. "I've already told you the story once. You would do well to reflect on my previous rendition and amuse yourself."

"Sheldon, repetition serves to solidify the details of a story."

"Which is of no value to me, as I have an eidetic memory."

"However, I don't. Therefore, repeating the story both helps me retain the details accurately for future retellings and serves as a deterrent to your embellishing."

Sheldon's face pulled into an incredulous frown. "I don't embellish."

"You do."

He turned away, his lips pouty with displeasure.

"Sheldon," Amy began again, more softly, "would you like for us to turn into one of those married couples that spends more time arguing over the details when telling a story than actually telling it, all the while annoying their audience and stressing their own relationship?" The thought of it clearly alarmed him. She leaned forward, whispering the coup de grâce. "Howard and Bernadette."

"Oh dear," Sheldon said with recognition, his eyes wide as his gaze returned to the ceiling. "Point taken." He sank back to the pillow and turned to Amy, clearing his throat. He even smiled a little. "Very well then. Here is the story. After leaving you at the apartment, I raced to free Enrico from the bike rack and, clad in little more than my street clothes—and without any protective wear at all—I sprinted across town to the Western Union. Upon withdrawing the cash, and with not a moment to waste, I biked furiously to the bank, securing Enrico on the bike rack. With only minutes to spare, I bolted for the door, tugging on it firmly, only for the door to remain stubbornly shut."

Amy was giddy at this point. "I like this next part."

"Amy!" he said shrilly. "You can't interrupt in our future retellings. Spoilers take all the fun out of it."

"Indeed they do," Amy conceded. "Please, continue."

"I pressed my face to the glass door, desperate and longing for the transparent gates to give way and allow me within their borders. Our loan officer happened to be standing there at that very moment and saw me. He made a hand gesture indicating that the door should be pushed opened and not pulled. Accordingly, I leaned into the door and, once it opened, I walked right in. He led me to his office, where we made the deposit, and he had me initial a deposit slip. He gave me a receipt and a printout of the re-appropriated loan amount, then assured me we would be closing on Tuesday. We shook hands, and I left."

Amy bit her bottom lip, barely able to contain her giddiness. "I like the part where he gives you a receipt. It's the long-awaited resolution after the climax."

"It is rather satisfying," Sheldon said.

She smiled widely. "And the ring?"

"Ah, yes. On my way back to the hospital, I spotted a jewelry store. I told the gentleman at the counter that I was in a hurry and needed a simple, but elegant, engagement ring so I could propose
to my girlfriend. The gentleman was a rather snarky fellow, and claimed that hasty proposals were putting his daughter through USC. I had the suspicion he had used the line before. Regardless, he presented me with various pieces of jewelry, many of them gaudy, unattractive or flat out silly. Honestly, sapphire has no place in a token of matrimony."

Amy nodded. "Agreed."

"After perusing my options, I selected the very one on your finger."

Amy glanced down at her hand in sustained disbelief at what she found there: proof that she was getting married. She was almost limp with contentment, and sighed. "It really is a great story."

"It is," Sheldon agreed, rather proudly.

In a burst, Amy leaned forward and planted Sheldon with a kiss. "LET'S PLAN OUR WEDDING!" she said.

Sheldon turned away, muttering. "Which appears to be an unavoidable requisite to the actual nuptials."

Just then, Amy's phone rang on the nightstand. Lifting it, she saw that it was her mother.

"Hello Mom," she said, sitting back against the headboard. "It's good to hear your voice too… I know, I know. Everyone saw it on the news… I didn't want to scare you… I'm fine, thank you…"

Amy rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom, giving Sheldon a look that pleaded for understanding. "Although on second thought, the leucine enkephalin in your tears may actually help you feel better."

When the door shut, Sheldon reclined once again on the bed. He was debating whether to return to sleep or to put on a cup of tea when his phone rang. The call was from the University—odd for a Saturday.

"Hello?" he answered.

"This is Arlo."

"Dr. Seibert!" Sheldon said, surprised. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you. More importantly, how are you and Dr. Fowler?" Seibert asked.

"We're doing as well as can be expected for persons who've been recently terrorized by a crazed lunatic."

"Understandable," Seibert said. "That's the very reason I'm calling. When I became aware of the awful developments transpiring last night, I immediately formed an ad-hoc, emergency committee to deal with the situation and we resolved to do several things. First and foremost, we'll be continuing our cooperation with the FBI to ensure that Dr. Zurbriggen is prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

After what Sheldon had just experienced, the only justice he sought was never hearing from her again.

"Additionally," Seibert continued, "we want to be of whatever assistance possible to you and your family."
"Well," Sheldon said, without missing a beat, "providing me with secure employment would be a fine place to start."

"Which brings me to my third point," Seibert said. "We will be fully reinstating you to the University in your position prior to the start of the project. Additionally, you will be compensated at your highest salary."

To Sheldon, it seemed fair. Actually, it seemed like the only reasonable course of action.

"I'm glad that you came to your collective senses," he said. "Well done."

Seibert sighed. "You're welcome, Dr. Cooper."

Sheldon was caught off guard by the non sequitur. "Thank you would have been the more apropos response, which leads me to believe that you think I should show some sort of appreciation."

"It would be nice."

"Fine then," Sheldon said patronizingly. "Thank you." He thought a moment. "Am I to report on Monday?"

"Nah," Seibert said. "It will take a few days to go into effect. Meanwhile, take the time you need. You won't be expected to come in until after Labor Day, at the beginning of the academic year."

Sheldon nodded. That would give him two weeks—plenty of time to be done with the business of moving into the new house. "Dr. Seibert, if there is nothing else, may you enjoy your weekend."

"Same to you Dr. Cooper," he said. "My regards to Dr. Fowler?"

"Of course," Sheldon said. He hung up.

He sat a moment, reflecting on this promising development, when there was a knock on the door. He went to answer.

"Good morning, Shelly!" Mary chirped. "We are on our way to continental breakfast if you two would care to join us." Oddly, she was by herself.

"Good morning, Mom," Sheldon said, suspiciously, "but I can't help but ask where the twins are."

She turned around behind her, surprised to find no one there. She snapped her head around, and Sheldon stuck his head out of the door. The twins were racing down the hall, laughing and squealing the whole way.

"Get back here now!" Mary said. "Or y'all will be eating a breakfast of saltine crackers and prune juice." They stopped dead in their tracks and spun around, forlornly making their way back to their grandmother.

"That sounds dreadful," Sheldon said.

"Of course it does. It's supposed to sound dreadful," Mary said. "That's how you get 'em moving." She leaned forward whispering. "I'm not really going to do it, but they just have to think I would." She smiled. "So, you and Amy coming or not?"

Sheldon looked at the bathroom door. "We aren't ready. Amy is on the phone with her mother. We'll have to join you later."
"Suit yourself," Mary said. "More for me." By then, the twins were back. "Say good morning to your daddy."

"Good morning," the twins intoned in unison.

"Good morning," Sheldon said.

"Now let's go," Mary said, and marched off. Like two little ducklings, they followed after her.

As Sheldon shut the door, Amy came out of the bathroom, busily typing into the face of her phone. She was adding something to her calendar. Sheldon made it to the bed before she did.

"My mother's coming," she said, without looking up, from the entrance of the bathroom door.

"Why?" Sheldon asked.

Amy looked at him in disbelief. "Because she's worried about me. Because she's excited about the proposal. Because she wants to help us move."

It was, unfortunately for Sheldon, a series of very compelling reasons for a visit. "When?"

"In the next couple of days."

"Is she aware of the fact that we're in a hotel?"

"Yes, Sheldon, I told her."

"And what did she say?"

"She's coming anyway."

Sheldon didn't say anything. Amy looked at him.

"If I didn't know better I would think you were actually bothered by her coming, an interesting response considering your mother is currently dwelling, on our dime, in the next room over."

"Well, you should hardly be surprised by my reaction," Sheldon said. "Your mother is not exactly my biggest fan."

Amy walked over nonchalantly, climbing back onto the bed. "She loves you," she said, returning her phone to the nightstand.

"A fact she manages to keep well hidden," he muttered.

Amy crawled over to where he was sitting. She kissed the side of his face tenderly. "Making you feel loved is my job."

Sheldon turned to her, expressionless, save for the glint of warmth in his eyes. She felt the mood in the room shift—to something calmer and more intimate. "Speaking of jobs," he said. "Seibert just called."

"Oh really," Amy said, a bit taken aback. "Now he shows up. Where was he last night?"

"Apparently in a meeting determining my fate." He paused, and Amy waited anxiously for the verdict. "He's fully reinstated me to my previous position, and even at the higher salary."
It was the outcome she'd expected, the outcome he deserved. Even so, she wasn't sure why, but she felt a sinking feeling in her chest. This was without question good news, and they truly needed the money, but there was another feeling, wrenching at her. She nodded pleasantly, but turned her eyes down. She sat back some, on her knees, holding her hands in her lap. She forced the sound of cheer into her voice. "So you'll be… going back to work?"

Sheldon nodded. "Soon."

She diverted her eyes. "You return on Monday?"

Sheldon shook his head. "After Labor Day. At the start of the new academic year."

Amy nodded, feeling strangely relieved. "Okay," she said. They looked at each other quietly for a while. Amy glanced down at Sheldon's hands that were sitting idle on the bed. She took one of his into hers, smoothing it flat as he looked on silently, letting her. She splayed his fingers apart, gently tugging them open, then lifted them upright, pressing her hand against his. An electricity passed through her as she pushed against his palm and met strong, but effortless, resistance. Her fingers were small and delicate against his thick, brawny digits.

"We're getting married Sheldon," she said.

"I know."

She slowly threaded her fingers between his, clutching his hand. "I love you."

"I know."

He paused a beat, then lowered his fingers to hers, clutching her hand as well.

"I love you, too."

Amy and Sheldon were not the sort to be bystanders in their own lives. One might imagine that with so much in their future still uncertain, and with the things that were certain still requiring a great deal of work, that the couple would be facing a critical next couple of days, filled with careful planning, thoughtful decision making, and a frugal use of limited resources.

Instead… they mostly just goofed off.

The newly affianced missed breakfast altogether, and their first attempts at wedding planning somehow turned into them spending the morning reading about ancient Norse connubial customs while snuggled in bed amidst a mound of pillows and fluffy comforters. By lunchtime, they were famished. The whole family went to the hotel restaurant (that served standard American fare) for lunch. Robert noted there was a hotel pool on his way back to the room, and after digging out bathing attire that had somehow made its way into the luggage, they spent an entire afternoon of Marco Polo playing, armband floater wearing and beach ball tossing. By the time they exited the pool (properly shriveled up like raisins) it was time to eat again, and the whole kit and caboodle went back to Sheldon and Amy's room, where they dined on delivery pizza. When they were done, Mary gathered empty water bottles and grease-soaked paper plates while the twins climbed into the enormous king-sized bed and settled in for the Disney Channel's featured presentation: Fantasia. Mary balked at some of the more magical elements, but was soon sucked into the engaging music and charming animation. As entertaining as the film was, it had been a long day and neither the twins (nor their grandmother) had gotten a nap. An hour in, Amy and Sheldon found them watching the film alone together. When the credits rolled, Sheldon wasn't sure if he should carry the young children or his mother back to their beds next door.
The following day was Sunday, and after Sheldon dropped his mom off at a church she liked to frequent when she was in town, they went to visit Penny, Leonard and Baby Leonard, who were freshly home from the hospital. They spent an hour or so fussing over the infant, chatting with the new parents, and weighing in on which of the baby gifts were "gender neutral."

As Penny cuddled her newborn in her arms, the twins fought to wrap their minds around the fact that he was the same baby that had been inside of her for nine-long months. Sheldon, for his part, fought to wrap his mind around the fact that he wasn't the godfather. As his impassioned defense for his suitability for the position and his fervent denunciation of Raj's suitability went on and on, Leonard made a break for the bathroom. "I thought you didn't want to be a godfather," Amy whispered after Leonard had gone. "That hardly means I wouldn't do an exemplary job," Sheldon said. "Honestly, Amy, I should have been a shoo-in." Mercifully, they were all saved by the yell, and Baby Leonard's pleading cries indicated to Penny that it was time for a feeding and then a nap. Accordingly, the Fowler-Coopers all packed up and headed out. As they passed the door of their own apartment, Sheldon looked at Amy, tacitly asking her if she was ready to return. Amy just shook her head, and they kept marching down the stairs. They'd collected his mother from church and enjoyed the relaxation of a lazy Sunday afternoon.

Monday morning was set aside for picking up Amy's mom from the airport, but when an unexpected obligation forced her to postpone her trip until Wednesday, they just… went to the zoo instead. Later that night, they lay in bed, recalling the amusing things the twins had done over the day. The conversation drifted to the wedding. They made some general decisions: they'd have the wedding in the spring, maybe early summer. Leonard would be the best man and ("no offense Bernadette") Penny would be the matron-of honor. Amy would wear her mother's wedding dress; Sheldon would wear his father's watch. They fell asleep thinking of songs for their first dance.

Tuesday was the culmination of months of planning and research and saving and hoping beyond hope. Gathered around the table were a large cast of characters all involved in the sale of the house, and Sheldon and Amy listened with feigned attention as the closing agent droned on about details that Amy and Sheldon had all but committed to memory. Finally, the moment came that she'd been anxiously waiting for: the closing agent held out an elegant pen, an unspoken invitation for her to put her name on the dotted line and make her dream a reality. Amy took a deep breath—trying to keep her composure—as she signed her name. Handing the writing utensil to Sheldon, she watched him do the same, and she thought back to his reluctance to move only a few short months ago. That was all different now, and she could see the pride in him as he put his signature to the paper.

At long last, the house—Amy's dream house—was theirs.

In good spirits and with moving on the mind, they made the trip to their storage unit. A day ostensibly set aside for packing up forgotten trinkets, photo albums and random furniture was, instead, filled with spontaneous games of hide-and-go-seek and protracted storytelling as the adults took turns strolling down memory lane. They worked until they got hungry, and then went for tacos.

When they got back to the hotel, Amy pondered tackling various other miscellaneous tasks that might be done on the eve of a big move: sending out "we've moved" cards or washing up the last of dirty laundry. However, after a perfurctory glance at Sheldon, who was online convincing himself that his hangnail was potentially fatal, she decided to make a quick peek at some online research of her own (there was no way her old sleepwear would follow her into marriage). Before she knew it, hours had passed with her sitting at the hotel desk. She had sixteen browser tabs open and was reading an article on how Peter the Great's court jester had a bridal party that included 72 dwarves. At some point during her "research," the kids had wandered in, and as the hours passed, the whole family spent an entire afternoon in a monument to time poorly spent: laughing, jumping, crying,
complaining, making pictures out of the coffee grinds in the hotel room, tickling, entertaining each other with a wealth of pointless trivia they all had a knack for accumulating, and mostly spending time just being together.

After having tucked the kids in at eight, Sheldon stood by the door while Amy sat on the settee. He had a disturbing realization.

"Amy, despite having eaten just an hour ago, I'm still hungry." Apparently, his bowl of instant oatmeal had not been as substantial as he'd hoped.

"I'm hungry as well," Amy said immediately, and hopped up to walk over to hotel desk. There she located a leather-bound folder. "Let's order room service," she said.

"I didn't realize this hotel had a kitchen," Sheldon said, joining her by the desk.

"It doesn't," she said. "But the attached restaurant will still deliver to the rooms and charge it to your bill. It's practically the same thing."

Sheldon shrugged. "A convenient solution." He peeked over her shoulder to peruse the menu.

Amy was accosted with a sudden feeling of déjà vu. "I once recall us ordering room service as we spent an idle evening in a hotel."

Sheldon turned from the menu to Amy, then back to the menu. "I seem to recall such an occasion as well." He paused. "If memory serves, you ordered a pair of peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches."

Amy smiled at the memory. "And you ordered chicken Florentine."

"Indeed I did," Sheldon said. He continued to peruse the menu. He could feel Amy looking at him, a grin on her face. "What?"

"We also shared a very steamy kiss."

Sheldon seemed to recall that detail as well with some chagrin. "After sharing a deep bottle of pinot gris."

Amy's grin had morphed into a full smirk, and her eyes seemed to be trying to tell him something. As usual, he was having difficulty figuring out what.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she said.

"You often ask me that Amy," he said, "but I rarely am."

"Fine, then," she said. "I'll state it outright. Let's reenact that night."

Sheldon, as he suspected, had not been thinking that. "To what end?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said with a coy shrug, "to remember how we got started. Bring it around full circle."

Sheldon considered the proposal. "I imagine I could humor this idea, but any attempt we make at a 'reenactment' will be an inferior facsimile at best. You surreptitiously donated the Iron Man T-shirt I was wearing that night to Goodwill—"

"It was faded," she said in her defense.
"It was vintage," he countered. "Besides, I haven't seen you wear those jeans with the floral blouse in a very long time."

The statement touched Amy. "You remember what I was wearing?" she asked. Then she caught herself: of course he did. He had an eidetic memory, a fact that he would be pointing out in five, four, three, two…

"How could I ever forget?" he said.

Her heart aflutter, Amy picked up the phone and excitedly dialed for dinner.

Sheldon and Amy were sitting on the floor in front of the bed, giggling uproariously, with the trappings of room service scattered all around them.

"In the end," Sheldon said in conclusion to his story. "It was neither here nor there, because the animal was in fact not a beaver at all, but actually an uncharacteristically large muskrat. The entire freshman Math Club ran screaming from the aquatic beast, leaving the upperclassman, and my 13-year-old self, thoroughly amused."

Amy was laughing so hard that tears are pressed from her eyes. "That story has suddenly become funny again," she said, as she fought to catch her breath.

"It might be because you're drunk," Sheldon said.

"So are you," she replied.

Sheldon belched, then touched his chest, a bit woozy. "I believe I am." He looked down at the plate on his lap, struggling to focus his eyes on the half-eaten food before him. "They were wrong, Amy," he said. "Grilled chicken and creamed spinach do not taste just like chicken Florentine."

Amy wasn't terribly sympathetic. "Too bad. My peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were better than ever," she said. "And so was the wine."

Sheldon looked around the room idly. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now time for our… kiss," Amy said, lifting her eyebrows suggestively.

"Right," Sheldon said, notably not kissing her. One of his eyes was closed.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Sheldon crawled to the door to answer it, then stood up to look through the peephole. He turned around in terror. "It's my mother!"

Amy stood, with some effort, and leaned against the table. "Be cool. Be cool," she said, in a decidedly not cool manner.

Sheldon opened the door. "Hello, Mother. What a wonderful surprise," he said, exceptionally cheery. "You are looking particularly wonderful tonight. Are those curlers in your hair?"

Mary noted his glee, but had come with a purpose and was intent on getting to it. "Yes, Shelly, they're curlers. Now, I don't mean to bother y'all, but I went to do my daily devotional before going to sleep. I seemed to have misplaced my Bible, and the hotel copy is missing out of my room. Would you all happen to have one?"

Sheldon turned Amy, and she walked off to go and check if there was a Bible in the nightstand drawer. She tripped a little on the way.
Mary didn't miss the stumble. "You okay, dear?" she asked.

"In tip top hip hop hoppity shape," Amy said. "Hoppity hippity."


Amy started laughing too, walking to the door with the Bible in hand. "Happy rootin' tootin' reading," she said.

Sheldon collapsed into guffaws, holding on to the door just to remain standing. "Rootin' tootin' hifalutin,'" he said.

Mary looked on the woozy scene with disgust. "Are you drunk?" she asked.

Sheldon, aware of his inability at persuasive lying, deferred to Amy. "Would you like to take this?"

"I would," she nodded. She turned to Mary. "Yes." She held out the Bible. "Here you go."

"No thank you," Mary said, turning her face away. "I won't take the Good Book from hands soaked in alcohol. I'll just have to read it off my Kindle, but it's not the same." She shook her head.

"Shelly, you should be ashamed of yourself," she said and left.

Sheldon shut the door slowly. "Amy, look what you've done. My mom's upset."

"Awww," she said, coming closer and pinching his cheek. "She can never stay mad at her Shelly Welly." She turned away, a smug smile on her face. "I'm full of rhymes tonight. I could have been a poet."

Sheldon seemed surprisingly comforted. "You're right. She can't stay mad at me. She adores me." He scrunched up his face, struggling to focus his mind. "Now where were we?" He answered his own question. "Oh, right. Coitus."

*Coitus*?!

They hadn't said anything about having sex, but she wasn't going to correct him. "Right, coitus," she said.

Sheldon, possibly plagued by compromised vision, steadied his gaze then leaned forward and kissed Amy squarely on the mouth.

He was a great drunk kisser.

She put her hands on either side of his head, pulling him forward and they staggered over to the bed, bumping into a chair and knocking over a fake potted plant on the way. They crashed on the edge of the bed, still kissing. Amy got straight to business and tried to unbutton his pants, but was having trouble with the fastening on his belt.

"Wait," he said, and then grabbed her shirt, pulling it over her head. She nodded at the bit of progress. Then he reached his hands behind her, working on her bra, but again, was having some difficulty with the clasps. After a minute of fumbling, Amy pushed his hand away.

"Come with me," she said, tugging at his shirt while crawling to the head of the bed. She lay on her back. "Kiss me," she said.

Sheldon leaned over her and they continued making out. After a minute, she tried again with his pants zipper, skipping the belt altogether, but could feel a hitch as she went down.
"You got it caught in the fabric," Sheldon said. "Hold on." He sat up on the bed on his knees, fiddling with it for a few moments with no success. He got off the bed and turned on the overhead light and resumed pulling on it. The zipper was really stuck. He yanked at it firmly several times, and it finally came free. Then he jiggled the fastening on his belt with some difficulty, making a mental note to never wear a belt buckle from "Harry Houdini" Howard again. Having successfully defeated all the hardware associated with his pants, he returned to the bed to find Amy…

Fast asleep. Her head was turned to the side, and she was lost in a light snore.

He shrugged, changed into his nightclothes, turned out the lights and got into bed. As he lay there, something dawned on him.

"We didn't have sex that night!" He turned to Amy. "You are a vixen, Amy Farrah Fowler."

Bright and early the next morning—far too bright and early for a hungover Mom and Dad—Sheldon, Amy, the twins and Mary headed to the airport to pick up Mrs. Fowler. She'd brought various toys gifts for the kids and after a quick trip to Starbucks for coffee and breakfast, Amy and Sheldon dropped off their mothers and the kids at the new house, where they'd get things ready. Then Amy and Sheldon drove to 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue to enter their apartment for what would likely be the last time.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Some things had to cut. Like the Texas-shaped ice sculpture.

The moving committee had assembled and was ready for work. Leonard was on paternity leave, and had agreed to give them a few hours of moving time. Raj and Howard had both taken "sick days," suspiciously claiming they'd shared a fork and fallen ill with the same bug. Penny, still recuperating, had agreed to set up a drink and snack station across the hall. Bernadette would be showing up after her meeting at 2pm.

Sheldon, who was nursing a chamomile tea, stood alongside the other guys in the middle of his living room, which had become a hectic mix of storage room and livable home. Already mid-morning, most of the boxes had been carried down into the U-Haul outside, but there were still a lot of things that needed carrying out and much of it wasn't even packed up.

"I'm kind of surprised, Sheldon," Leonard said as he poked at a stack of folded towels on the kitchen table.

"How is that?" Sheldon said as he thumbed through a clipboard full of tedious instructions he'd composed that was making this experience as hellacious as possible for his friends.

"I half figured we would come to an apartment that was packed, organized and labeled within an inch of its life."

"Apartments are inanimate and thus have no lives," Sheldon reply. "And might I add that, lest you've forgotten, I've been rather preoccupied in the last week with keeping a sociopath from destroying my life and the lives of my family."

"Fair enough," Leonard said. He looked down at the towels. "So, should I take these down in a box or in a bag?"

"Please, gentlemen," Raj announced, rising from where he had been crouching on the floor. "Allow me to manage the logistics of inventory and item placement. You all should focus on being the brawn of this operation."

"And you'll be doing what, exactly?" Leonard asked.

"Playing to my strengths: organization and operations. They don't call me a domestic goddess for nothing."

"No one calls you a domestic goddess," Howard said, lifting up a box of glassware.

"Trust me. If there was a 'they,'" Raj said, nodding, "they would."

"Now hold on just a minute," Sheldon said to Howard. "That box says 'fragile.'"

"Yeah, I know it says 'fragile,'" Sheldon. I can read."
"Then why are you carrying it like that?"

Howard looked away, exasperated, then back at Sheldon. "Like what?"

"Like it's sturdy. Your center of balance is off, your posture is structurally risky and your arm position is positively reckless."

"Sheldon, I didn't take off from work to have you ride my ass all day."

"I won't have to," Sheldon said. "With your poor carrying technique, the hemorrhoids you get will be more than happy to do the job."

Raj started laughing.

Howard looked at him with disgust. "That's not funny."

"It is a little," Raj said.

As the guys emptied the apartment, Amy sat across the hall, convening with Penny.

"So to this day," Amy said in conclusion to her story, "Caesarean sections are named for the Latin verb *caedere*, meaning 'to cut,' and not for the Roman emperor."

"Is that where we get Caesar salad from, too?" Penny said, joking. "You have to cut those up."

"No," Amy said. "Caesar salads are named for Caesar Cardini, an Italian immigrant who invented them." She nodded patronizingly. "But you get a star for trying."

"Thanks," Penny said sarcastically.

There was loud ding and Amy jumped up. "Whoops. Popcorn's ready." She raced to the microwave and emptied a steaming bag into a bowl on the counter. Then she looked around idly, as if looking for something else to do. It struck Penny as odd.

"Amy, you don't have to help me if you don't want to," she said. "The baby's asleep and I'm feeling a little better today. If you want to go and help the guys, by all means, go. They are probably over there destroying your furniture as we speak."

"No," Amy said with a sigh. "I'll just...park over here." She spotted a pile of crumbs on the rug. "Let me get that right up," she said, then raced over to the closet, pulling out the vacuum cleaner.

"Um, thanks, Amy, but I'm afraid the vacuum might wake up the baby."

"You're absolutely, right," she said, nodding. "I'll just sweep it up."

"You know, you don't have to, really. Leonard can get it when he gets back."

"I won't hear of it," Amy insisted, and grabbed a broom. Brooms, however, are not terribly effective on carpet, and she was having difficulty getting it all up.

Penny watched the scene and began to be suspicious. "Why don't you want to go and help move?"

"Oh, I do," Amy said. "I just want to finish up here first."

Much like Sheldon, Amy wasn't the best liar.
"Is this about Lise-Marie?" Penny asked.

Amy didn't answer, but her face said it all. Penny felt a pang of sympathy in her chest.

"Oh, Amy," she said. "Does Sheldon know?"

"Yeah," she said. "He's over there managing everything." She shook her head. "I never imagined I would someday be too nervous to go into my own home. Well, my old home."

Penny stood and walked over to where Amy was in the kitchen. "Sweetie, I can't imagine how terrifying it was to think your life was in danger, or to be abused and insulted by a woman who has no respect for you or your family or your home."

Amy turned away, her face grave. "I've never been so scared in my entire life."

Penny placed a hand on her shoulder. "But you know what, as scary and sick and horrible as she was... you were smarter, stronger and braver. You outsmarted her. You won. While you're out enjoying your life, she's in jail with nothing."

Amy nodded. "I know."

Penny didn't know exactly what to say, but she wanted Amy to know that she had her support. "If you don't want to go back over there, I completely understand. But, since this is the last day you'll ever 'live' in the place you called home for five years, you might want to close that door. It may even give you some closure. No matter what you decide, I'm right behind you."

Amy looked at the door to the apartment, imagining herself on the other side of it, then back at Penny. "I think I do want to go back."

"Yeah?"

Amy nodded. "Would you go with me?"

Penny looked over at the bedroom door, where the baby slept inside his bassinette, then back at Amy. "Sure," she said. She walked over and picked up the baby monitor off of the coffee table. Then they made the seemingly 100-mile journey across the hall. Amy paused a moment before she put her hand on the knob and let herself in.

No one was inside, and she figured all the guys were downstairs. She walked to the center of the room. In the few brief hours they'd been working, Leonard, Howard, Sheldon and Raj had made the apartment almost unrecognizable. The couch, tables, boxes and many of the things that had once decorated the walls and made this place their home were all gone. Even so, it was as clear as ever that within these four walls Amy had begun the biggest adventure of her life. Even Lise-Marie couldn't take that from her.

"How do you feel?" Penny asked.

There was a knot in Amy's throat. She didn't answer.

The door opened. Led by Sheldon, the guys bustled back in, and they were bickering loudly.

"It's not that big of a deal, Sheldon," Leonard moaned.

"It isn't? Duct tape was designed for ductwork," Sheldon argued, "and packing tape was designed for packing. If one only pays attention to—" He stopped talking when he looked up. "Amy?"
She turned around.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. Seeing him touched something in her, and she started crying. He walked over to her, looking down at her sadly. "Don't cry," he said.

She just hugged him. He hugged her back.

The afternoon wore on and the guys, Penny, and Amy were sitting on the floor along the walls of the apartment and eating pizza and drinking beer. Of course, Leonard was eating hot wings and Sheldon was drinking a Diet Coke. Bernadette was in the bathroom. Enviably, Amy and Sheldon's moms had taken their grandkids and the Wolowitz boys to Chuck E. Cheese, and with any luck, they would all come home exhausted and ready for bed.

The apartment was now completely empty. Every chair, every rug, every dish, every spoon, every pair of pants and every gaming console was now either packed in the truck or parked in the new house. The only tasks that remained were vacuuming the bedrooms and scrubbing the tub. And then…

They would leave for good.

"I remember when this place used to be a raging bachelor pad," Raj said, reminiscing with a huge smile on his face.

Howard's face matched his friend's reverie. "Oh if these walls could talk. We had some wild times in here. The weekends of non-stop gaming."

Raj continued. "The epic costume parties."

"The kiss-ass karaoke."

"The hot babes."

"The days experimenting."

"The nights of drinking."

Leonard looked at them, annoyed at their revisionist history. "The sinus infections, the asthma attacks, the whining about how lonely we were."

"I don't remember that," Howard said.

"Why are you so negative?" Raj asked.

Bernadette returned from the restroom, gazing down at her phone. She looked forlorn.

"I can't get either of your mothers," she said. "Do you think everything is okay?"

Howard reached out his arm, and she sat down next to him. "I'm sure everything is fine, Bernie," he said. "Chuck E. Cheese is really noisy. They probably can't hear their phones ring over all the ruckus."

"Yeah," Raj said. "Whenever I go there, it's so loud I can barely hear myself think."
Howard looked at him sideways. "You go to Chuck E. Cheese?"

Raj snapped back defensively. "I dunno. Maybe. What's it to you?"

"Why? You don't even have any kids."

"I've never lost my childhood whimsy, Howard. If that's a crime then lock me up."

"You might get your wish," Leonard muttered.

"I'm just really worried about the boys," Bernadette said, returning to her initial point. "They usually don't go into public places without Howard or me. What if they get scared, or frightened, or..." She gasped, sitting up straight. "Or lost!" She stood up. "That's it, Howard. We have to go and get them."

"Look, honey, everything is fine. Just relax. You don't see Sheldon and Amy freaking out."

She looked at the other couple, who indeed were calmly eating their pizza.

"Look at you," Penny said. Bernadette turned to her. "All nervous and overprotective and neurotic. If I didn't know better, you're turning into a real mom." Penny looked away, stunned. "God, I cannot let that happen to me," she muttered.

Bernadette turned away, blushing. "I guess I am."

"That's my Bernie," Howard said proudly. "The number one mom in the world." He snuggled in, kissing her on the cheek.

"Oh, Howie!" she cooed.

"Honestly," Amy said, leaning into Sheldon's ear, "from a purely statistical standpoint—considering her short time as a mother and initial extreme reluctance to the role—I doubt that she even cracks the top five percent."

"Howard has an inferior education," Sheldon whispered back. "We've been suffering from his miscalculations for years."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. "Come in!" Amy said. The landlord had mentioned he would stop by to pick up the keys.

"It's Dr. Corbin," the voice said.

Dr. Corbin? That was the chairman of the Biology Department at Pasadena University. Amy looked at Sheldon, then rose to answer the door.

"Hello?" she said.

"Yes, I'm Dr. Corbin, the chairman of—"

"I know who you are. I'm really surprised to see you here." She stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind her. "I would invite you in, but I have no seat to offer you."

"No problem," he said. "My assistant has been trying to contact you for over a week, but had no success."

"At what number?" Amy asked, surprised.
"Um, one moment." He scrolled through his phone until he found the entry, then held up the screen for her to see. Her mobile number had been entered incorrectly and her house number, though correct, hadn't been working ever since her captor had cut the cord.

"I'm sorry you had to come all the way out here," she said. "Actually, I'm moving today."

"So I heard," he said. "It's for that reason that I stopped by. I want to let you know that, after considering all the candidates for the professor position at Pasadena, we decided that you are by far the most qualified. Honestly, it would be an honor to have you as a member of our faculty."

Amy was surprised. Delighted really. This had been what she wanted for a long time.

She stood looking at the chairman.

"So, would you accept? I wouldn't have made this trip out here if it wasn't so important to us."

"Of course, of course," she said. "I accept."

"Great!" he said. "I'm thrilled. If you could come by my office tomorrow, we can finalize your appointment."

"Sure, absolutely," she said.

He held out his hand, and Amy took it. "Thank you Dr. Fowler. I look forward to working with you."

Amy walked back inside, a little shell-shocked.

She had got the job.

"Sheldon, can I see you in our bedroom. Our old bedroom," she said. She walked off and he followed.

"Ohhh," Raj said, giggling like school kid. "Sheldon's in trouble."

"Grow up, Raj," Sheldon said and he followed behind Amy.

They entered the bedroom, standing just inside, and shut the door behind them. It was a few short months ago that they had stood in this very spot, and Sheldon had told him about his appointment to the project.

"I got the job at Pasadena," she said simply.

Sheldon looked down then back up. Then maybe tried to smile a little, but the disappointment was clearly written on his face. To his credit, he tried his best, but he couldn't hide how he really felt. It was the thing that drove her crazy about him.

And the thing she loved so, so much.

"I'm happy for you Amy," he said. "I know that's what you wanted."

There was a moment of silence and then, with a final nod, he turned and opened the door to go.

"Wait," Amy said, grabbing his arm. He turned around.

"It's not what I want."
Sheldon looked at her, confused.

She tried to explain. "I mean it was what I wanted. At first. But now...."

"You said that if Pasadena offered you the job—"

"I know what I said," she said, "but after all we've been through." She took a moment to figure out what she wanted to say. "I'm not going there for the right reasons, and if I've learned anything from all this, it's that making decisions based on your ego is not the right way to go. Pasadena is not right for my career or for our family. It's not right for me."

Sheldon took a moment to absorb the words. "So what now?"

Amy's eyes grew big, and she squeezed past him through the open bedroom door, running to the living room.

"Good, Amy, you're back," Raj said. "Settle this for us. If bonobo monkeys are pansexual—"

Amy dashed past them without stopping and out of the front door. She bolted down three flights of stairs and busted through the double door. She spotted Dr. Corbin, who was standing beside his car parked on the street.

"DR. CORBIN!" she called.

He turned around. His face lit up.

"Yes, Dr. Fowler!" he said. "I was just now leaving."

"I, uh," she began, gasping for air. She was... she really out of shape. "I have something to tell you."

"What is that Dr. Fowler?" he said, horrifyingly jolly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm going to have to decline your offer."

He was stunned. "Why?"

"There were many factors to consider."

He looked disappointed.

Amy tried to soften the blow. "I really consider the offer an honor, but," she sighed, "I simply have to decline."

He reluctantly accepted the reality of the situation. "Well, thank you for considering it. If you ever are interested in our institution, there's always a place for you there."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll keep that in mind."

As she watched him drive away, she felt like a load had been lifted off of her shoulders.

The first night in the new house was a memorable one. Even though they owned beds, they weren't put back together yet, and they all ended up sleeping on the floor on palates on the floor that Amy made out of blankets, comforters, sleeping bags and pillows. They had four bedrooms, so the twins—ironically—were put in one, the mothers each took a room, and Sheldon and Amy plopped down
in the middle of their bedroom. Despite the discomfort of sleeping on the floor, the excitement of the first night in her own house meant Amy felt like she was sleeping on a cloud.

Sheldon got up before she did and wasn't beside her when she awoke in the morning. She wobbily walked towards their master bathroom to get herself ready for the day ahead of her. Her eyes panned the room, taken with the sleek commode, jetted tub, double-basin sink and freestanding shower with multiple shower heads. She'd seen it all before, but it still gave her pause: she could hardly believe this was her house.

Since their bedroom was on the far side of the upstairs hallway, she passed the other bedrooms and the small office on her way to the stairs. She paused a second and stuck her head in the room where the twins were. Aditi had abandoned her spot and was snuggled up under her brother.

Upon making her way downstairs, Amy found Sheldon in his PJs, pulling small boxes out of a larger box, one by one. Mary was next to him while Mrs. Fowler watched from where she was situated on an upside-down crate.

"Who cares if they mixed the Marvel and DC universes together," Mary said. "They're all just comic books."

He recoiled at the statement. "Mom, I'm afraid I don't know what you mean by 'just comic books.'"

"Good morning," Amy said. She was greeted warmly. She walked over to Sheldon. He just shook his head.

"It'll take until this time next year to undo the severe carnage those gentlemen inflicted on our possessions, Amy."

"Awww," she replied jovially. "Chin up, buttercup."

He looked at her, not amused.

"Sheldon," she said, her tone more serious. "Based on your comments last night, I thought you were coming me."

"I am," he said nonchalantly, sorting through the booklets.

"Then we should be leaving shortly."

Sheldon sighed. "I'll get ready."

Amy walked up to the door of the Chair's Office of the Biology Department and went inside. She walked over to the receptionist, who looked up at her entrance.

"How may I help you?"

"I... don't have an appointment," Amy explained, "but I was hoping I could have an audience with the chair."

Without saying anything else, the receptionist called Dr. Cramden. After a brief exchange, she asked for Amy's name, and continued her dialog. She hung up. "Go right in," she said.

Amy nodded in appreciation and made her way back to the woman's office.

"Amy!" Dr. Cramden said, warmly. "I was hoping we'd speak again. Have a seat."
Amy did so. For some reason she felt really nervous. *Very* nervous.

"I know that I have tarried in responding to your offer for a position here in your Biology Department. I can only hope that you haven't seen this delay as a depreciation or belittlement of this fine collection of researchers and educators. I assure you I have not intended to abuse your generosity or the—"

"Let me stop you, Amy," Dr. Cramden said with a bit of smirk on her face. "You have the job."

"I do?"

She nodded. "It was just for you, anyway. It's not like you have competition or anything."

Amy felt extreme relief. "Thank you. I don't know what to say other than I'm very appreciative."

She shrugged. "I think it'll be a mutually good thing. Besides, we need more women around here." She started thumbing through a flip calendar on her desk. "We're a little close to the start date for the new semester," she said, "but I can start you off on a grant I have for visiting researchers and we can go from there. Would that be agreeable to you?"

Amy nodding enthusiastically. "Absolutely."

After nailing down some preliminary details, and an animated handshake, Amy went to join Sheldon out in the hallway. But he wasn't there. She looked up and down the hall, then knocked on the men's room, to no avail. As she headed to the car, she found him outside the building talking to a colleague. He walked off just as Amy walked up. Sheldon looked at her calmly, but expectantly.

"The verdict?" he asked.

Amy smiled. "I got it. She gave me the job."

Sheldon shrugged smugly. "I figured so much. The Biology Department should be so glad to have you aboard."

He turned to walk towards the car when Amy stopped him. "Let's get married," she said.

Sheldon was flummoxed by this request.

"Um, Amy," he began, "the ring you are bearing on your left hang signifies that we've already come to a decision on that matter."

"I know," she said. "But let's not wait. Let's get married… next week. Next Saturday."

With each sentence from her mouth Sheldon's shock increased. "As in nine days from today?"

"Exactly," she said, confidently. "Labor Day Weekend."

Sheldon seemed to consider the idea for a moment, but was struggling with it. "I'm at a loss at your sudden haste to wed. Just yesterday you were waxing poetic about pop-up wedding invitations that played the theme song of 'Saved by the Bell' and a drift of potbellied pigs dyed purple at the reception hall."

That song always brought a smile to her face and, of course, pigs are a long-held Germanic symbol of good luck. However, sacrifices would have to be made.

"I know, Sheldon," she said, "but… the only thing certain about Life is its uncertainty and—"
"Oh, Amy," he said dismissively, "have we resorted to paradoxical clichés?"

"Hear me out, Sheldon," she insisted. "I don't know how our lives will be a year from now, or even a month from now. But I know two things are true: I know I love you and our children more than anyone or anything else in the world and I know that no matter what, we can get through anything together. The realization of that makes me very happy. Happier than I have ever been. And while we're entering into such a wonderful time of our lives, what better way to begin it with our wedding."

The words resonated with Sheldon, and she could see his mind coming around to the idea.

"Fine then," he said. "Call Raj. We have a wedding to plan."

"You might want to call him. Because… you know."

"Of course," Sheldon said.

As Amy and Sheldon let their closest friends and family know that they were getting married in a mere matter of days, they were met with screams, gasps (and in Raj's case) a squeak. After making the decision, they spent the afternoon looking through cake designed, searching for reception venues, brainstorming favor ideas and putting rush orders on everything.

Mary and Mrs. Fowler, who were practically raising the twins at this point, took the children to get fitted for their suit and dress while Amy FaceTimed with them from the bakery. It was a close call, but the bridal shop had the style dress she wanted in fuchsia. The fact they had puffed sleeves was a lucky bonus.

They eventually crashed back home and started compiling a list of names from which to send out Facebook invites. Amy disappeared upstairs for a while and, when she returned downstairs, Sheldon was reading a book.

"Sheldon," she said. "I have something to show you." He looked up to see that she was holding a piece of paper. She cleared her throat and began to read. "I, Amy Farrah Fowler, have chosen you, Sheldon Lee Cooper, to be my husband. In you, I have found a friend, a confidant and a father for my children. I have found a man who is loyal, good and true. I offer myself, flaws and all, to you. I vow to love you, care for you, and be a faithful companion no matter what may happen, as long as we walk this earth."

"I'm assuming those are your wedding vows," he said.

"Of course," she said, moving forward. "They aren't my grocery list." She took a seat next to him on the arm of the chair. "What do you think?"

He nodded. "They are very pretty, Amy," he said, sincerely.

"Thank you," she said proudly. She looked down at the words she'd written. Sheldon returned to reading. "Have you thought about what you're going to tell me?"

Sheldon didn't look up from the page. "Of course."

This was exciting news for Amy. "What?"

He rattled off the words quickly, almost as if he was reading them from the publication in front of his face. "I, Sheldon Lee Cooper, take you, Amy Farrah Fowler, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to
have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward for as long as we both shall live."

"Sheldon," Amy said, "those are just the normal vows that thousands—if not millions—of people have already used."

Sheldon closed his book and looked up, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I thought you might say that. Lucky for you, I've been ruminating on alternate vows, something a little more distinct, if you will."

"Really?" Amy said, encouraged.

Sheldon cleared his throat. "My Queen, may the Force be with us as we travel through the galaxy of life. I pledge to never turn to the Dark Side but stand forever in the illumination of our love. I vow to fight the Evil Emperor and I invite you take your place at my side as we rule the galaxy. Take my hand and stand with me for light and justice throughout our lives."

There was a long silence, a foreboding one, one ominous enough to actually cause Sheldon to become concerned.

"Your thoughts?"

"Are those from Star Wars?" Amy asked, deflated.

"Well done, Amy Farrah Fowler," he said, with glee. "Although, mention of 'the Force' was a major clue." He thought pensively for a moment. "I'm considering removing the part about the Evil Emperor."

"Sheldon!" she said. "I want real vows. She looked at what she's written again, her voice softening. "I thought you might compose something special, just for us."

Sheldon looked at her with puzzlement. "I can't imagine why. I never said anything to indicate I would."

"But now that you know I did, would you at least consider it?"

Sheldon rose, heading to the kitchen. "Amy, I'm a scientist, not a poet." He looked into the refrigerator, severely disappointed. "If we were forced to live in this house for a week without leaving, I fear we would starve to death."

Amy got up too and took a few steps closer to the kitchen. "You don't have to be a poet to express in your own words what our marriage means to you."

"Please, Amy," he said, looking up. "If those words were good enough for the mother of Luke and Leia Skywalker, they're good enough for us." He shut the refrigerator door. "There's nothing to drink. I'm going to the store. Would you like anything?"

It was a long time before she answered, and he looked at her expectantly.

"No."

He nodded and left.

Despite secretly harboring dreams of wedded bliss for years, as well as having attended the weddings of her closest friends, Amy was still unprepared for how many decisions had to be made
in advance of the wedding. Having only nine days to plan meant that, early on, she and Sheldon had to determine what was important, compromises had to be made quickly, Amy would have to trust and rely on the people around her for certain things, and other things simply had to be cut.

The decision about which cake to choose became easy when their favorite bakery notified them that only one cake design was available with less than two weeks' notice (a three-tier cake with fondant ribboning, that was still very pretty). In their search for fitting cake toppers, they came across a design made of Lego figurines online that Sheldon was more than happy to replicate himself. Mrs. Fowler took it upon herself to order bouquets and boutonnieres for the wedding party, and did well in matching them to the fuchsia of the bridesmaids’ dresses and the hunter green-striped accents on the men's tuxedoes. As the days raced by, the doves got cut, as did the pot-bellied pigs, Texas-shaped ice sculpture, and the Klingon-language wedding translator.

There were, however, certain things that Amy and Sheldon were both unwillingly to forego. Amy, for one, had grown attached to the idea of coming down the aisle by herself. If her father couldn't give her away, she reasoned, no one else could. Sheldon, insisted on keeping the ceremony small, and when the number of invited guests started to creep past 80, he slashed workmates, old church members and kooky relatives from the list with unrepentant abandon. Of course, there was also the matter of where to have the ceremony.

Ever since the news had first dropped, Mary had been making none-too-subtle remarks about having the wedding at a church. In support of that aim, she could be heard calling local houses of worship for pricing and availability for a "backslid Christian." Mary's presumption of seeing her son wed at the proverbial altar was an understandable one, and while Amy was not strictly opposed to a church wedding, Sheldon squirmed whenever the matter came up. His usual defiance to all things religious was being compromised by his mother's persuasive combination of stalwart insistence, her patented guilt-tripping skills, and one bold reminder that he hadn't met his promise to go to church with her for "three years running."

With Sheldon paralyzed by indecision, and with only four days until game time, Amy couldn't wait any longer; she made a trip to the courthouse. With a receipt for an officiant's fee in hand, she approached Mary in the family room where her future mother-in-law was tying ribbons on candy-filled boxes shaped like elephants. Sheldon was nearby in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich.

"Good news, Mary!" she said. "I've secured a judge for the ceremony!"

Mary looked up from the laundry basket, mild alarm on her face. "A judge?"

"Yep!" Amy said, bright and jovial. She looked down at the paper in her hand. "I had on good information that a Judge Rembrandt will hitch up any two crazy kids for the low, low price of $50." She smiled. "He even agreed to wear a green and white striped tie for the event."

"We never said anything about a judge," Mary said. She looked at Sheldon, who was frozen stiff with a slice of bread in one hand, and a mustard-laden spoon in the other. "Were you aware of this, Shelly?" she asked.

Sheldon stammered as he began to answer. "Actually—"

"Uh, no," Amy said, piping up. "No. You see, we were so fortunate to get the judge, I figured we didn't want to let the opportunity get away from us, especially on such short notice." She paused, feigning confusion. "I'm sorry, have I done something wrong?"

"Well, that hasty decision cost you a church wedding. No man of God worth his salt is going to let a heathen wedding happen between his walls."
Amy looked at Sheldon, then back at Mary, and put on a wounded face. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I thought you always wanted us to have a legal ceremony to make our union official?"

"I do, but thanks to this 'judge' business, you managed to suck the 'holy' right out of holy matrimony," Mary said, rising to her feet. "I'm sorry, Amy, but you go back to that court and tell the nice man that you've found somebody else."

"Oh!" Amy asked. "I thought I'd heard you say that it would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for you to find a church on Labor Day Weekend."

Mary turned away, discomfited. "I might have said that in a moment of frustration, but the church comes bundled with the minister. Problem solved."

"Ah!" Amy said, "So, then you were able to find a minister?"

"Well not exactly."

"So then we don't have a church or a minister?"

Mary was a bit stung by Amy openly pointing out those facts. "Now, Amy," she said, her voice reflecting her shifting mood, "there's things you don't understand. I know Shelly has moved out here to California and got a lot of crazy ideas in his head, but he was raised in a Christian household and those traditions are all he knows. In many ways, they are the foundation for our family. The fabric of our community. They are very important to me. It frankly hurts me that you would toss them out so lightly."

There was a moment of silence. Mary looked at Amy, Amy looked at Sheldon, and Sheldon looked at his mother.

"Well then I know what we have to do," Amy said, walking over to Sheldon.

"What's that?" Mary asked.

"Postpone the wedding."

"POSTPONE THE WEDDING!" Sheldon and Mary yelled in unison.

Amy nodded vigorously. "It's the only option."

"Now, that seems a bit extreme," Sheldon said. "On second thought, I really don't even—"

"NO, no, no," Amy said emphatically. "I would hate to come between this family and your cherished customs."

"Cherished customs?" Sheldon repeated.

"No, Sheldon. We'll just call everyone up and tell them that we are going to push the nuptials back to, I don't know, March, June… maybe next Labor Day. Then, you and I will just continue to hold on to each other stronger than ever and cling to our love." She lingered on the word "love." "Let's focus on settling into our new house, warming up our new kitchen, breaking in our new master bedroom—"

Mary had heard enough. She walked right up to Amy, touching her shoulder.

"Y'all's five years of shacking up together have been five years too long. I'd rather see you two married by a witch on a broom than keep living like y'all are living without the benefits of
marriage." She grabbed Amy's arm, pulling her back towards where she'd been sitting on the couch. "Now help me finish tying ribbons on these party favors."

As she was dragged off, Amy looked over her shoulder, smiling at Sheldon. He looked on with a mix of "what just happened?... and deep relief.

In a matter of days, Sheldon and Amy had turned into conjoined twins connected at the ear. While operating in different arenas, they stayed in near-perpetual contact, constantly checking in for updates on details ranging from the major (the catering budget) to the miniscule (the number of jelly beans in each wedding favor). It was in the evenings, however, that they finally came together, and their new king-size bed was doubling as their war room. There, they would slash off everything they'd gotten done that day and then construct a game plan for the day to come. On the surface, the meeting served a functional purpose, but it was slowly becoming Amy's favorite part of the day.

At least, it had been.

Sheldon was finishing up his summary of where they were on the to-do list. "Finally," he said in conclusion, "the linens for the reception tables have been reserved, we've secured an African Grey Parrot to be our guest book attendant and Bernadette's dress can indeed be ordered from the children's catalog." He scratched off three items with a flourish. "We should pat ourselves on the back. We accomplished quite a bit today, not the least of which was getting my mom to give up on the Great Labor Day Weekend Church Hunt of 2019. Kudos with that, Amy, although I still can't fathom why you wanted to postpone the wedding."

"I didn't want to postpone the wedding," Amy said, curtly. She was notably less celebratory than Sheldon was.

"Then why did you say you did?" he asked.

She glared at him, answering with clenched teeth. "TO GET YOUR MOTHER TO GIVE IN!"

Sheldon turned to her, finally aware of her perturbed stated. "You seem a little tense," he said.

"Yes, Sheldon," she replied. "I'm a little tense."

Perplexed, he returned his attention to his laptop with confident enthusiasm, scrolling through his spreadsheet while making budgetary notations in the margins. "We're ahead of schedule and under budget, the weather forecast is in our favor, and our first guest arrives tomorrow. You'll be glad to know I even made arrangements for her to attend your bridal shower tomorrow. Penny said it was okay."

In the face of such optimism, Amy's mood remained staunchly gloomy. "Lovely. Great. Just dandy. Everything is rainbows, sunshine and lollipops. Except that is ABSOLUTELY ISN'T!"

Sheldon sat back at the outburst. "Why not?"

"First of all, our 'vegan' menu includes eggs—"

"Which is only a concern because of all the hippies on your side of the family," he answered.

"Our DJ has never even heard of polka music—"

"I have a few albums I can recommend."
"AND WE DON'T EVEN HAVE A PLACE TO HAVE THE DAMN WEDDING!

"SHHHH!" Sheldon said, imagining his mother hearing her in the next room over. "You should really calm down."

"I should calm down?!" Amy said in a muted yell. "How can I possibly calm down?! Currently, our wedding is a first-class fiasco waiting to happen."

Sheldon raised turned away, doubtful. "I think that may be a bit of an overstatement."

"Is it?" she said, her temper rising. "We've ordered a sit-down dinner for 80 guests, purchased a cake to match, arranged for the delivery of ten centerpieces for as many tables, reserved eight hotel rooms and have five pairs of tuxes and formal dresses lined up at bridal shops, for what? We haven't even told the caterer where to deliver the food!" She started breathing hard, and clutched her chest. "I can't take the pressure; it's too much." Her hands felt clammy, her forehead was beading with sweat, and her mouth was dry. "Sheldon," she said, gasping for air, "I think I'm dying." She sat upright in bed, gripping the bed sheets. "Sheldon, it's official: I'm dying."

Sheldon looked on perplexed as his fiancée fell to pieces. "I don't believe you are."

"HOW WOULD YOU KNOW!" she screamed. "ARE YOU A DOCTOR?!"

"Actually I am," he said. "Although I imagine you are speaking of one of the medical variety."

"SHELDON!" she yelled, then collapsed dramatically back to the bed. She pressed her eyes closed, covering them with her balled up fists. If this is what it felt like to plan a wedding she didn't want any part of it.

Just when she could feel the walls closing in on her, she felt two firm hands close around her wrists. Not rough hands, but gentle ones. Then she heard a voice.

"Amy."

The voice was tranquil and calm and seemed to be coming from the very heavens. As soothing as it sounded, she was too panicked, too frazzled to respond. The voice came again.

"Amy."

The calm voice didn't call, but beckoned her, summoned her from the brink of free-fall. She could feel the tension fading from her chest. The voice came once more.

"Amy." And this time, the two hands that were wrapped around her wrists gently tugged her hands down. "Open your eyes."

Entranced by the authoritative yet encouraging voice, she lifted her clenched eyelids. She looked up to see Sheldon's face hovering above her own.

"What, Sheldon?" she asked, her voice broken and timid.

"I am rarely in a position to say these words, but as they have been directed at me on many an occasion, I think you would do well to hear them now."

"Which words are those?" she asked.

"Calm down and take ten deep breaths."
Now fully subject to his will, she took a breath—slow and deep. With each exhalation, a little more of the anxiety that gripped her seemed to dissipate. Finally, she reached ten.

"Now what?" she asked.

Sheldon was at a loss. "I don't know. I usually don't make it to ten." He let go of her arms, returning to his place on the bed. He kept watching her, though, mindful of her distress.

"What if our wedding is a disaster?" she asked.

"If we get married, it won't be a disaster," he said, perfectly calm.

"But what will everyone say? What will everyone think? Nothing would make my cousin Janie happier than to see my nuptials featured on Nightmare Weddings."

Sheldon turned away, frustrated, and then looked Amy in the eyes. "I don't care where our wedding is, Amy, or frankly if anyone else even makes an appearance. In fact, I find the idea almost preferable. I just want to close the gap on our family once and for all. I want to marry you."

In those words, the last bit of any panic she felt went away and she thought back to what was important. She drew closer to him, nudging her head under his arm. "Hold me."

He wrapped two arms around her.

Everything was going to be okay.

Amy set out at 6:45 the next morning to go pick up Sheldon's aunt from the train station just outside of town. She was looking forward to it, actually; she could use a car ride.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

I can be surprised. Dazzle me."

Amy sat on a wooden bench outside of the train station soaking in the warm rays of an early sun while simultaneously enjoying the cool breeze of a late-summer morning. She'd brought along a paper sign with "Gladys" written on it so Sheldon's aunt would recognize her when she arrived. She'd also brought along her wedding organizer and her faithful phone, with every intention to use the time to poke around at some of the finer points of the wedding details. In the end, however, she just sat there. It was the first moment she'd had to truly relax since she'd hatched the idea to have a quickie wedding, and it felt good to just take a moment to watch the squirrels scuttle through the trees, the birds sing as they perched on the back of the benches situated along the track, and the rays of colored sunlight from the station's stained-glass windows grace the sidewalk. Before she realized it, she'd dozed off.

She awoke to the sound of a loud whistle and clanging bells alerting her and the handful of other people waiting along the platform that the train was on its way. Rousing herself, she stood and looked down the track and watched the engine lead the train into the station. There were only a few others waiting along the platform. This station, apparently, was an overlooked stop on the way to flashy Los Angeles.

When the train stopped, a handful of people got out. One young guy—a hipster type—alighted with just a mobile phone in hand. The next was a mother with two small children and a couple suitcases. Next came a man who looked like he may have been living on the train for the last six months. His beard was unkempt and he was carrying an assortment of mismatched and dirty "luggage" that included a couple grocery bags. Finally, there came the woman Amy had been waiting for.

Late fifties, maybe early sixties, she glanced at Amy then focused on the sign the younger woman bore. Recognizing her name, she walked forward more confidently, a smile on her face.

"April?" she asked.

"Amy," she said in correction.

"No, actually, I'm Gladys," the aunt said. Amy noted how remarkably the woman's voice sounded like Mary's, though her manner was softer.

"Of course, Gladys," Amy replied, lifting the sign. "My name is Amy."

"Ah," Gladys said, finally catching on. "Amy, of course. My memory sometimes," she said, and thumped her head a couple times.

Amy nodded. "No problem. You're Mary's sister?"

"I sure am," she said. "First time here in California, but let me tell you, I like what I see already. It's so hot in Galveston."
"You just missed a hot spell." Amy reached out her hand. "Here, let me take your luggage."

"No, no. I've got it," Gladys said. "But if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to use the restroom before we set off."

"Of course," Amy said, and the two women set off for the building.

Once inside, Gladys left her possessions with Amy and scurried off for the ladies room. Amy, alone in the spacious station, took a look around. It was the first time she'd ever been there, and she was surprised at how spacious it was considering its relative lack of use. The room was lined with mahogany paneled walls and boasted a high vaulted ceiling. The windows were tall, letting in plenty of light, and each one was crowned with a stained glass arch at the top that ushered in sunlight through fanciful geometric patterns of red and blue and green and yellow. It seemed to beckon from another time.

She spotted a worn, copper sign on the wall and walked over to read it. It told the story of the station and its origins that began over 50 years prior. As she read, a station attendant approached her.

"First time here?" he asked.

Amy turned around. "Yes," she said, wonder in her voice. "Surprisingly?"

"How's that?" the man asked.

"My fiancé is a train enthusiast," she explained. "I've been to many a station, but never this one."

The attendant nodded admiring the view himself. "Well, don't be a stranger. We'd love to see you again."

"Speaking of which," Amy said. "I have a proposition."

Sure, they'd sent out an update to their Facebook invitees, but it hadn't seemed like it was enough. Plus, they had actual vendors to call with the now confirmed wedding location, like the florist, the judge, and, of course the caterer.

So Sheldon and Amy made phone call after phone call, beginning each conversation with "I'm going to keep this brief," only to find themselves on the phone 15 minutes later, doing things like copying email addresses so they could email a more recent picture of the twins, or explaining that train station was not the restaurant in LA but, like, an actual train station. Sheldon had never been gifted with patience or really tolerance of any sort, so after Amy hung up with the owner of the parrot, she glanced at him, preparing herself to witness a dormant volcano about to erupt.

Instead, she saw a man looking at her and smiling from ear to ear.

"Who was that?" she said, expecting him to say his grandmother, or Stephen Hawking, or one of the others in the ridiculously small handful of people with whom he actually enjoyed talking on the phone.

"My dentist," he said.

She didn't recall seeing his name on the list. "He's coming to the wedding?" Amy asked.

"Nope. His secretary just happened to call. I have an appointment on Tuesday after next."
"Oh," Amy said. That meant there was still no explanation for his cheerful facial expression. "Why are you smiling?" she asked.

"Because… a train station," he whispered with wonder. He looked at her a few seconds more, then suddenly leaned forward, pulling her into a hug. "Thank you, Amy," he said.

Now she was smiling, almost laughing. "You're welcome."

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Penny and Bernadette were scurrying around the Wolowitz home, putting the final touches on the place in preparation for Amy's bachelorette party. The night was young, but the place was crawling with women happy to just be away from the house. Penny had surreptitiously stalked Amy's Facebook page and managed to invite a few of her friend's hipper relatives, as well as a few of Amy's former workmates that she'd kept in contact with. Even then, Penny wasn't sure if the crowd would be rowdy enough to keep the party live, so she recruited some of her wilder friends—the ones who were pretty much up for any event that included booze and blue entertainment. As a final touch, Missy would be attending via Skype. She was also doubling as a consultant.

There was a better-than-sex cake on the kitchen table, Smirnoff Ice in the fridge, and copies of a naughty word search on the gift table that Penny had printed off the internet. It contained a shocking number of words that began with the letter "P." She clutched a handful of suggestively shaped balloons in one hand and a bunch of normal shaped ones in the other. She held them close to the computer screen. "So should we bunch all the balloons we got from the 'big girl' store together, or spread them out with the other ones?"

Missy tilted her head one way, then to the other, examining the decorations. "Assuming the 'big girl shop' is what I think it is, spread 'em around. Amy's a total prude. We don't want her to faint as soon as she hits the door."

"Right," Penny said, lowering her eyelids and lost in deep thought, as if this were a new idea. "I guess we should think about what Amy wants a little."

Missy nodded. "Also, you told me you weren't going to hire dancers, right?"

"Of course not," Penny said, a bit defensively. "This thing is going to be classy, Missy. Amy is a mom after all."

Bernadette walked up, holding a roll of tape. "Where should I hang the 'Pin the Tail on the Dong' poster?"

"Over there," Penny said pointing. Bernadette nodded and walked off. Penny turned back to Missy; even through the computer screen Penny could see the clear look of accusation on the other woman's face. "What?!" Penny said. "There's a bulls-eye over the naughty bits."

Missy tried to stifle a laugh. "Best matron-of-honor ever."

"I'm not the matron-of-honor anymore," Penny said.

Missy was shocked. "Why not?" she asked.

Before Penny could answer, there was a knock on the door. She began to furiously start hushing everyone.

"That's her," she said, and rushed to the door. She put her hand on the handle and went to open it, but something told her to look through the peephole first. When she did, she jumped back in shock,
spinning and putting her back against the door and her hand to her heart. "Dear Baby Jesus!" she gasped.

"What? What is it?" Bernadette asked.

"Mrs. Cooper and some old lady came with Amy!"

Bernadette jumped up, startled. "If Mrs. Cooper walks in here she is going to die of a heart attack!"

Penny nodded. "What are we going to do?" she said, her voice suddenly turning shrill.

There was another knock.

"Hold on just a sec," Penny yelled through the door.

Bernadette scanned the room. "First we have to pop those balloons," she said.

"And pull down that poster," Penny said, pointing.

"And throw out the naughty word search."

"Go, go, go!" Penny said. They raced around the room, frantically trying to bring the party from R-rated down to something closer PG... 13.

In a moment of horror, Bernadette thought of something. "Who bought the box of vibrators?" she asked in a strained whisper.

One of Penny's friends raised her hands.

"GET RID OF IT!" Bernadette said. The woman hopped up, snatched it from the table and tossed it through the kitchen door.

Finally, making a quick inspection of the room, Penny and Bernadette nodded at each other.

There was another knock, and Amy called through the door. "Penny?"

"Coming, coming," Penny said, jogging to the entrance. She opened the door with a big smile. "Hello Amy, and Mrs. Cooper and…"

"This is Sheldon's aunt, Gladys."

"Welcome Gladys," Penny said with a deep sigh and feigned grin. "I hope you have great time, ladies."

"I heard several loud explosion noises," Amy said, as they passed the threshold. "For a moment there, I thought you all were involved in some sort of combat."

"It was popcorn," Penny lied. "Yes, popcorn." She turned to Bernadette. "Could you check on the popcorn?"

Bernadette scurried off the kitchen.

It was Friday morning and Penny was stretched out on the couch, sound asleep as Baby Leonard slumbered next to her in his bassinet. She awoke when Leonard opened the door.

"Hey, sleepyhead," he said, and walked over to her, kissing her on the forehead. "Not feeling
"No, it's not that," she said, pulling herself from the couch. "It's just that I have to sleep when he does or I never will." She looked at the two garment bags Leonard had in his hand. "So you got them, no problem?"

"No problem at all," Leonard said. "Although that 'rush fee' was brutal."

"Yeah," Penny said. "I can't believe the shop got them to us six days."

Leonard walked off to the bedroom, presumably to hang up his tuxedo and her dress; he re-emerged a few minutes later. He walked over to the bassinette, watching his son sleep.

"So," Penny said, "have you thought about what you're going to say in your toast at the reception?"

"Oh, um..." Leonard said, apparently thinking about the matter for the first time. "I have to do one of those?"

Penny nodded. "Yep. You're Sheldon's best friend. And it has to be good."

Leonard thought for a second, and then a smile came across his face. "I should pay him back for the speech he gave at our wedding."

She was surprised at this statement. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember? He told the story about the time I had diarrhea for three days!"

She shrugged. "It wasn't so bad. I think it was kind of sweet, you know, the way he looked after you and nursed you back to health."

"He didn't 'nurse me back to health,' Penny. When I was at my weakest, writhing on the floor with stomach cramps, he locked me in the bathroom with three pillows, a down comforter and a bottle of penicillin so I wouldn't 'contaminate the rest of the apartment.' The only time he bothered to show up at all was when he slid cheeseburgers, Gatorade and Pepto-Bismol through the door whenever I fell asleep."

Penny scrunched up her face. "It sounds better the way he tells it."

"Yeah, well, it's going to be better the way I tell my story, too. As soon as I come up with one that's a good enough." He paused reflectively. "Ooh, ooh, ooh!" he said. "Got it: what about the time he wet his pants when he met Mark Ruffalo in Whole Foods?"

"Who?"

"Mark Ruffalo? The actor who played the Hulk in The Avengers? They had to call for a cleanup on the produce aisle and Mark Ruffalo ended up signing Sheldon's bag of Depends." He laughed at the memory. "Or how about the time he got arrested for stalking Stan Lee? Or, or, or," Leonard said laughing, "the time he started crying when Howard told him Leonard Nimoy had been stampeded to death by a clowder of cats as an April Fool's joke."

"That was mean," Penny said.

"But freaking hilarious."

Penny shook her head and bit her lip. "This is a bad idea."
"C'mon," he said dismissively, "Guys roast each other. That's what we do. It'll be fun."

"You can't do it," she said. She stood up and walked over to the kitchen. Nursing made her thirsty.

"I can't do what?"

"You can't be a douche. It's not in your nature."

"Oh, you have got me so wrong, sister," he said. "I can be a major douche. A super, duper, big-sized douchey douche."

Penny considered the matter for a moment, her lips pursed. "Nah. You can't do it," she said, pouring herself a glass of water.

"Oh, I can't, can't I?" he said, defiantly. "Well, challenge accepted!"

"That wasn't a challenge," she said.

"Well, it's accepted anyway," Leonard said. and stormed off to the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Penny asked.

"I have a toast to write!"

Sheldon, Amy, the twins, and the moms were all having lunch when something crossed Mrs. Fowler's mind.

"So where are you going to sleep tonight?" she asked.

Sheldon was baffled by the question. "In my bed, of course."

"Oh, that will never do," she said.

"May I ask why not?"

"It's bad luck to see the bride on the morning of the wedding."

Sheldon scoffed. "I don't bide by superstitions," he said. "Tomorrow morning, you will find me in my bed, as snug as a bug in a rug. Or some other thing that is equally as well rested."

"You're wrong about this one," Mary said authoritatively. She scooped up a spoonful of vegetable soup, blowing on it gently. "You start fooling with luck on the day of your wedding and you got a world of trouble on your hands. You gotta get out of here tonight, Shelly."

Sheldon looked at Amy, silently pleading for support. She just shrugged coyly.

"I admit, Sheldon, I want to surprise you tomorrow," she said. "I can't do that if you're around. Maybe you can stay with one of your friends."

"My friends?!" Sheldon said. "Altering my behavior for the sake of irrational tradition is positively ridiculous. Besides, who can I possibly stay with on such short notice?"

Just then, the phone rang. He answered, chatting very briefly and then Sheldon hung up.

"Who was that?" Amy asked.
"Oh, just Raj. He asked me to come over later. Apparently he has something to give me, but he didn't mention what it was."

"Maybe it's your bachelor's party," Amy said, taking a nibble off of her grilled cheese sandwich.

"It better not be," Mary said. "Your 'bridal shower' was enough filth for one weekend."

"Aw, Mary, it wasn't so bad," Amy said. "We were all adults."

"A red negligee?" she said. "You're getting married, not joining the whore house."

"A bachelor's party," Sheldon repeated to himself. The thought seemed to intrigue him. "In all honesty the thought had never crossed my mind. Maybe I should ask Leonard if he knows anything about this."

"It might be a surprise," Mrs. Fowler said. "Better just go without peeking behind the curtain."

"You're absolutely right," Sheldon said. "I think I'll just take your advice and say nothing."

Mrs. Fowler turned her head, almost aghast. "First time I've heard that combination of come out of your mouth," she muttered.

Sheldon and Enrico showed up at Raj's home exactly at six. After nine knocks accompanied by the repetition of his friend's name, the door opened.

"Sheldon," Raj said groggily, as if he'd just woken up. The lights were out in his apartment. "I almost forgot you were coming."

"I notice the lights are out," Sheldon said. "And what might that be about?"

"I fell asleep on the couch. Long day," Raj said, nodding. "I picked up my tux, glued appliques on all the party favors, dropped off handmade gift baskets at the hotel for all of your out-of-town guests, not to mention went for a facial, and..." He held up his hands for display. "And a mani and pedi." He shook his head. "Planning a wedding is not for the faint of heart."

"So, why did you summon me?"

"Right," Raj said. "I was going to ask you to your credit card number for the candles, but the store had your information on file." He shrugged. "Sorry I didn't call. I mean you're welcome to come in since you came."

Sheldon leveled a disbelieving look at Raj. "Nice act. Now toss the lights, shout surprise and let the roasting begin." He paused. "But keep the jokes clean. I promised my mother."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Raj said. He honestly had no clue what Sheldon was talking about

"Sure you don't," Sheldon said, dragging out his words. Then he tilted his head and gave Raj an exaggerated wink.

"Seriously, dude," Raj said. "I'm lost."

"I'm sorry to tell you, Raj, but I already know."

"Know what?"
"You would have me say it, wouldn't you? Fine." He leaned in close. "The surprise bachelor's party."

"The surprise bachelor's party," Raj repeated slowly.

"Right." With that Sheldon bust in, flicked on the lights and…

No one was there.

After a brief repose, he nodded knowingly. "I see what you're doing here. Keep the genius guessing. Kudos to you. You have me guessing indeed." He sat down on the couch then folded his hands on his lap. "I can be surprised. Dazzle me."

Raj was beginning to see that this was not just another example of Sheldonian rambling; this was turning into a situation. "Excuse me, Sheldon," he said, and made his way into the hallway.

As Raj shut the door behind him, Sheldon called after him. "Take your time. It's still a surprise if I don't know what's going to happen."

Raj called Leonard, and was relieved when he answered.

"Yo," Leonard said.

"Sheldon is at my apartment and is being a little… weird."

"Just a little?" Leonard replied. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

"No, seriously," Raj insisted. "He keeps asking for details about his 'surprise bachelor's party.'"

Leonard gasped. "You're having a surprise bachelor's party for Sheldon and you didn't invite me?!"

"I didn't invite anyone!"

"Um, that's a weird way to throw a party, Raj."

"I'm not throwing a party," Raj said. He looked back at the door, making sure Sheldon wasn't there.

"Then why does he think you are?"

"I dunno. Someone told him there was a party. I thought it was you."

"You thought it was me?"

"Yeah," Raj said. "You're his best friend. Why aren't you throwing him a party?"

"Oh, gee, I dunno," Leonard said. "Maybe because he just got engaged within the fortnight and I've been busy WITH A NEWBORN BABY."

"Fortnight?" Raj repeated. "Seriously, don't try to be British, dude. It doesn't wear well on you."

"Excuse me, but I've been reading a lot of nursery rhymes lately, okay? Shoot me."

Sheldon could be heard calling from inside. "I'm waiting."

"He'll die if there's no party," Raj said. "You have got to get over here."

"Like, right now?"
"Yes, right now. We can't do it tomorrow."

"Goodness gracious. I'll... I'll have to talk to Penny." Leonard sighed. "But, I'm on my way."

Leonard, Raj, Howard, Wil and Kripke were all huddled outside of Sheldon's door. A second later, in walked Stuart and... Dale, Stuart's creepy and wacky cousin. Howard got close to Stuart, hovering near his ear.

"I didn't say you could bring someone," Leonard said, barely audible. He had a hunch, though, that Dale could hear him anyway.

"Oh. Him? He's my cousin... and my homeboy."

"Since when?" Howard asked. "I've never even seen you two hang out together."

"Well, since my girlfriend dumped me."

"Sorry to hear that," Leonard said. "What happened? You two seemed so happy together."

"She said she didn't mind cosplay in the bedroom as long I didn't put on anything that crossed the line. Turns out Hermione Granger was the line."

The guys all looked on with mild disgust.

"I think you would be a hot red head," Dale said, with his ever-present creepy smile.

Wil shook his head.

"Now what do we do?" Raj asked. "We didn't bring anything. No games, no food, no streamers, no balloons."

"I brought the brewskis," Wil said, holding up two twelve-packs.

Leonard shook his head, his mind ticking. He was a bit antsy. "Look," he said, "this can't take all night. I have a wife and baby to get home to and a long day tomorrow. So we go in there, yell surprise, knock back a couple beers, then leave."

"But Sheldon doesn't drink," Raj said.

"You think I don't know that?" Leonard said.

"Then what is he going to do?"

"What he always does," Howard said, "condescend, criticize and bore us to death with trivia about, I don't know, implements of torture from the Middle Ages. If we're lucky, it might have some vaguely kinky undertones."

"Okay, on the count of three," Leonard said. "One, two—"

"Hold on," Dale said. "What do we shout again?"

"SURPRISE!" all men shouted in unison.

Just then, Sheldon opened the door. "A surprise indeed. I had absolutely no idea plans of merrymaking were afoot." He winked at Raj.
Raj just winked back.

"Do come in," Sheldon said, walking away from the door. He stood in the middle of floor. "What rites of male bonding and husbandly camaraderie await? Let me guess: roasting the groom, a bit of gambling, the drinking of alcoholic beverages."

"You don't like any of those things," Raj pointed out.

Sheldon looked away, looking as if the thought hadn't crossed his mind. "I guess you're right. Well tonight, we can make an exception."

Howard rolled his eyes, then motioned for Raj to bring him the pack of cards on the bookshelf. "Well, I know my way around a pack of cards. Who's up for a little Texas Hold 'Em?"

"Dammit," Kripke said. "Since I figuewed thewe wouldn't be any stwippehs, I didn't bwing my stack of biwws." He shrugged. "Doesn't mattew. I'm feewing wucky."

Everyone groaned. Sheldon, however, was too excited by the impending game of poker.

"I've never played Texas Hold 'Em, before."

Kripke stared at him with bewilderment. "You'we from Texas and you have nevew pwayed Texas Hold 'Em?"

Sheldon shook his head vehemently. "Absolutely not. Coming from a Christian household, gambling was seen in a very negative light. Meemaw and I, however, passed many a summer evening out on the front porch playing 'Go Fish.'" He was struck with a sudden realization, a smile coming across his face. "Oooh, she's in town," he said, pulling out his phone. "Perhaps she could join us for just one game."

"Dude, this is bachelor's party," Raj reminded him.

"That's right," Howard said. "No females and definitely no meemaws."

"Of course," Sheldon said, a bit embarrassed. "No meemaws." He looked away, clearly not rid of the idea. "Although I think she would wow you with her 'go-fishing' skills."

Leonard had heard enough. "Hand me one of those beers, Wil," he said with a grunt as he reached towards the cooler. Taking one in hand, he took a healthy swig. "Nope. Didn't work."

"You know," Sheldon said, refusing to let the matter drop, "it's my belief that Baby Leonard could really benefit from having a network of loving adults in his life."

"I couldn't agree more, and thank goodness he will have one," Raj said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice that betrayed the fact that he already knew where Sheldon was going.

"So then you do agree we should be co-godparents?"

"LOOK SHELDON!" he said. This had been a running theme for days, and Raj had had it up to there with the whole matter. "I'm going to tell you this for the final time: you are not the godfather. You missed your chance. So get over it!"

Sheldon, clearly agitated turned to Leonard. "What I find more surprising is that my best friend's continued refusal to intervene demonstrates a complacency unbefitting a new father… Leonard."
"Sheldon, let it go," Leonard said. "You don't see me bitching because I'm not the best man."

"Why would you be… female dogging?"

"I mean, I wouldn't. It's just that I always kind of thought that, if you ever got married, I would be the best man. But I get it; kids get here, things change." Leonard looked at Sheldon. "Being a father, you should get that."

Sheldon didn't have any response that, and turned his eyes away.

There was a loud ding.

"Time up wosers," Wil said with glee. "The cowwect answew was ciwcowe."

Raj, Sheldon and Leonard looked up at the Pictionary easel to see what Stuart had drawn. It was a… circle. Stuart sighed, walking away from the easel, and dejectedly went back to where he'd been sitting on the floor. "Thanks for talking through the whole turn, guys," he said.

"We're sorry," Leonard said. "We'll really plug in next time."

"It's actually okay," Stuart said. "Losing is my comfort zone. I don't have my Paxil with me and I wouldn't want to chance triggering a win-induced panic attack."

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Raj, Howard and Leonard, as well as Sheldon, Stuart and Dale were scattered throughout the room in chairs, loungers and (in Stuart's case) face down on the floor. Kripke, gesturing wildly, finished his story.

"Yeah, so, thewe I am, weally wet in my biwthday suit, with wain fawwing on my head, and she's scweaming, 'Wittle Wed Widing Hood.'" The guys all busted out laughing. Howard leaned towards Raj.

"Are we laughing about the joke or his accent?"

"His accent," Leonard said, smiling widely.

Sheldon watched the cackling cluster of comrades with annoyance. "My muskrat anecdote was far funnier."

"Actually it wasn't," Raj said. "It was kind of boring. Plus, I've heard it before."

"Well, excuse me, but Amy thought it was hysterical."

"That's why you're marrying her tomorrow," Leonard said, sitting up in his chair. "Whatever you do, do not let her go."

Sheldon looked at him with mild annoyance. "Actually, she's marrying me today. Midnight has come and gone."

Leonard groaned at that bit of news, then looked at his cell phone. It was inching towards three in the morning. He really had to get back home. He rose from his seat, planning to collect the beers scattered on every surface, but instead fought to maintain his balance.

"Oh, wow," he said, "I got much drunker than I wanted to." He turned to Stuart. He was face down on the carpet. "Stuart?"
Stuart rolled over, drool running down one side of his mouth. "Huh?" he said.

"I need you to take me home."

"Okay," Stuart said, and got up, wobbly like a deer on his legs for the first time.

"Are you drunk?" Leonard asked.

"Yep," Stuart said, with no remorse.

"You were my designated driver!" Leonard shouted.

"Oh." Stuart said. "Then, Leonard, you are going to have to get another driver." He fell back onto the floor.

Leonard scanned the room for options. Everyone was clearly intoxicated. Everyone, except Sheldon.

"Well if you are expecting me to take you anywhere, I will save us both the hassle of suffering through such an exchange by preemptively informing you that I will not be taking you anywhere."

Leonard moaned, looked at the door, then back at Sheldon. "Screw it," he said, and stumbled back to the armchair. He set his cellphone alarm for six in the morning. Beer would was meant to be slept off and that's what he was going to do. In the meantime, he'd deal with tomorrow... tomorrow.

Despite not having slept a wink the night before, Amy had been up with the sun with a smile on her face and a bounce in her step.

This was her wedding day.

She was sitting on a stool in the break room of the train station and staring into a floor-length mirror. She was wearing a corset, stockings with garters, a bra and hair curlers.

"Amy," Penny pleaded, an eye-shadow palette in one hand and a brush in the other. "I'm going to need you to turn and face me. I can't make you look beautiful if you keep looking at yourself in the mirror."

"I know," Amy said, smiling. "But I love these lashes. They make my eyes pop."

"I'm going to make your

Just then, Aditi walked up. "Mommy, I have to go the bathroom."

"Sweetie, you can go by yourself," Amy said, still admiring herself in the mirror.

"But I can't find my panties."

Amy turned to her daughter who was engulfed in ruffles and a crinoline petticoat. She also had on some rather heavy duty stockings.

"Okay," Amy said, with a sigh. She threw on a silk robe she'd brought along and took Aditi's hand. "We'll be back shortly," she said, and then disappeared behind the bathroom door. As she went in, Missy came out. She was fully dressed.
"You put on your dress already?" she asked.

Missy nodded. "Might as well. I was hoping it would grow on me between now and the actual ceremony." She looked down at herself. "Not really working."

Penny groaned. "I know." She put down her makeup paraphernalia and then took a couple paces, lifting her dress off the hook hanging on the back of the door. She took Amy's spot in front of the mirror. She struggled to squeeze into the fuchsia monstrosity Amy had chosen for them. "This is the worst," Penny said, trying to stuff her boobs into the dress, with middling success. "Free tip: never get fitted for a dress right after having a baby. My boobs are different sizes every day. She would pick a big day to get hitched."

Missy laughed then walked over to Penny, pulling on the clasps to her friend's corset. "If you take one deep breath I think it'll all fit in," she said, wincing. Penny exhaled, deflating her lungs, and then sucked all the way in. Missy quickly yanked on the zipper, securing Penny in her prison of fabric. Penny exhaled.

"Thank you, Missy," she gasped as she turned around, but her body seemed frozen in an exaggeratedly upright pose.

Missy chuckled a little, putting her hand over her mouth. "You're welcome," she said. "So, when am I going to get to see the little one?" she asked.

"At the reception. He's with his grandmother out on the floor. She wasn't invited, but hey, we don't have a babysitter and tough decisions had to be made."

"He?" Missy said. "I thought you had a girl?"

"Oh yeah. About that. Turned out it was a boy."

"Oh wow. I bet that as a shock," Missy asked.

"A huge one," Penny said. "The great thing was, though, that it took us weeks to come up with Penelope Hope, but only an hour to come up with Leonard."

"That's actually not that unbelievable," Missy said. "A lot of people name their sons after their fathers."

Penny thought on it a minute. "I guess you're right." Penny looked at herself in the mirror, and for the hundredth time, started fidgeting with her the puff sleeves on her dress. "They look more hideous every time I look at them."

"I'm not that thrilled about them either."

Penny shrugged in the mirror. "I have to make sure these sleeves get covered up in all the pictures."

"So your son is a junior?" Missy asked.

"Oh. Well Leonard had, let's say, nighttime tinkling problems until he was in his teens, and there's no telling if he middle name 'Leaky' had anything to do with it. We figured we'd rather be safe than sorry and changed the baby's middle name to Wyatt."

"Wyatt?" Missy asked. "Like Wyatt Earp?"
"No," Penny said, turning around. "Like, my dad, Wyatt."

"Right," Missy said, a bit forlornly. She smiled a sad smile. "You're really lucky to have your dad, Penny. I'd give anything to see my dad just one more time. He was a bastard to my mom and he made some… well, a lot of mistakes, but he always treated me like a princess. She walked up behind Penny, looking at herself in the mirror. She squeezed her sleeves. "Shelly would never say so, but I bet he's thinking about Daddy today, too."

"Speaking of Sheldon," Penny said, "how does he look?"

Missy shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I should go and check on him. See if his bow tie is actually tied right." She smiled. "I give him a hard time, but I know he'll make a handsome groom."

Sheldon was walking around the train station greeting various guests. His grandmother walked up to him, giving him a huge hug.

"My Moonpie," she said warmly, while patting his cheek. "I'm so glad I saw this day before I died," she said.

Sheldon shook his head, a knowing smirk on his face. "Oh stop it, Meemaw. You aren't going to die," he said. "Not ever."

Meemaw laughed a warm chuckle. "Right once again, Moonpie," she said. "That's why you're my smart grandchild." Then she reached into her purse and pulled out a full-sized crocodile, by its gigantic, ridged tail. "Look at my new pet, Shelly."

"Huh?" Sheldon said. "Where did that come from?!"

"My purse, naturally," she said. "You getting daft in the noggin'?"

"Of course not. The very opposite. The notion that this beast could fit in your purse defies the physical laws of space."

"That mouth of yours just doesn't know when to hush up. Just for that, you have to kiss it."

Sheldon took a horrified step back. "I'll do no such thing."

Meemaw hopped up, shoving the snapping beast in Sheldon's face. Confronted with his powerful jaw and sharp teeth, Sheldon took off running, only for his grandmother to chase him doggedly in hot pursuit, the crocodile viciously threatening him with its bloodthirsty choppers.

"AAAGGRRRHHH!"

He sat straight up, screaming. His eyes were blurry, but soon came into focus, and it was then that he realized that he had been dreaming. However, upon taking stock of his surroundings, it is then that the real nightmare began. He jumped from where he was reclining on Raj's bed and raced to the bathroom, passing various bodies littering the living room on the way. He stared at himself in the mirror.

It was 11:00 on his wedding day, with only two hours until game time and he was wearing flannel pajamas, Indian silk slippers and a streak of dried drool down the side of his mouth.

"AAAGGRRRHHH!"
Chapter 44

Penny was pacing outside the train station door, wringing her hands and offering forced smiles to the guests as they filed in. Leonard had promised her he would get Sheldon to the wedding on time, and yet an hour had gone by, and there was still no sign of him. Worse, his phone was dead; her calls were going straight to voicemail. Just as she was about to slip into despair, she saw the Four Friends of Fail briskly jogging towards the door. If they didn't look so handsome (in spite of the green and white striped cummerbunds) she would have murdered them all on the spot.

"What the hell took you so long?!" she asked Leonard as he jogged towards her. Raj and Howard were scurrying up behind him while Sheldon tarried at the curb, fiddling with one of his dress socks.

"You already know we overslept," Leonard said weakly.

"That was your story two hours ago! I started to wonder if you were going to show up at all."

"Hello, Penny," Stuart mumbled, appearing out of nowhere. He brushed past her, his head down low, as he made his way inside. Kripke walked in behind him.

"Hewwo, wady," he said as he went by.

Penny shook her head then turned back to Leonard. He made his case.

"Traffic was horrible, Howard had left his shoes at his house, so we had to go and get them. Then we got held up by his mother, who insisted on making Sheldon a high protein breakfast of brisket and fried egg on rye bread. Then we had to go 20 minutes out of the way to drop off Dale."

"Who's Dale?"

Leonard shook his head. "It doesn't matter." Sheldon had joined them by that time.

"Considering the sizeable sum I paid to rent this outfit," Sheldon said, "I anticipated that the socks would be made of less abrasive material."

Leonard glanced down at his watch. It was ten minutes until 2:00. He grabbed Sheldon's arm, dragging him through the door and into the train station foyer. "Let's get you married."

The entire bridal party was lined up just inside the station, and groomsmen, bridesmaids, as well the two moms and all the serving grandparents were huddled behind the double doors of the foyer. The processional music was moments from beginning. Just one person had yet to join them. When Penny got the signal, she jogged outside and around to the back, and then re-entered the building
through a side door.

Penny stuck her head through the entrance of the break room, where Amy had been holed up for hours, to alert her that it was time. "Amy?" she called.

Amy turned around, and the sight of her literally stopped Penny in her tracks. She had seen Amy's dress bundled up in its semi-transparent garment bag for days and—after catching a glimpse of its mounds of ruffles—she assumed it would be another frilly horror show in the same vein as the bridesmaid's dresses Amy had inflicted on her bridal party. Somehow, however, Amy had managed to select a heart-stopping ensemble: a sleeveless, well-fitting, elegant gown that hugged her upper body. The dress's skirt consisted of several diagonal-cut layers of silk fabric, each longer than the last, that cascaded to the floor. Cinching her waist was a blush-colored, satin sash that tied into a bow. It sat, graceful and proud, on the side of her hip as its ribbons dangled the length of her dress and confirmed her designation as the princess she no doubt felt like. Her hair had been parted on the side and pulled into a simple but sophisticated bun that sat daintily at the base of her neck. Poised on the crown of her head, and secured with hidden combs tucked stealthily behind her side-swept bang, was a subdued veil that delicately draped in front of her face and stopped just beyond her chin. The sheer fabric was innocently coy but, instead of obscuring her face, softened it with a flattering haze. It was dotted with flattened pearl-colored disks, as if morning dew had settled there. Dangling from her neck was a three strand pearl necklace, the only gem worthy of the occasion.

In all the craziness of the day, the purpose of this occasion had almost gotten lost in the shuffle. In that moment, however, Amy had shed the daily costume of a tireless mother and absorbed scientist and was donning the regal garb of the dashing bride. For Penny, seeing Amy—Amy Farrah Fowler—standing there, dressed in her wedding gown, brought her to the brink of tears.

"Wow, Amy," she said, in an awed stupor. "You look really pretty."

"I do?!" Amy said, as if there were room for doubt.

Penny just nodded.

Amy turned back to the mirror, brushing down her skirt with her hands. "Do you think Sheldon will like it?"

Penny came fully in the room, standing behind her friend and admiring her in the mirror. "It's not possible he could feel any other way."

Amy turned to Penny, smiling. "Thank you, Penny."

Penny smiled. "Now, sweetie, let's go and get you married."

_____________________________________________________

Sheldon stood at the base of the aisle that had been created in the station lobby. He was positioned only feet away from Judge Rembrandt. He looked out at the friends, family members and colleagues sitting before him. Always anxious before an audience, he could feel fright settling in and his hands began to tremble. Lucky for him, his best man seemed to notice the situation.

"Are you nervous, Dad?" Robert asked, standing just to the left of his father.

Sheldon looked down at him, and then back out over the crowd. "A little, son," he answered.

Robert looked down the aisle with determined eyes, resolved to confront—head on—whatever might come. He took his father's hand. "I'm not," he said. "I'll be brave, Dad. Like Batman."
Sheldon turned to his son, amused; having Batman standing up for him seemed like best deal in the world.

The music began and all heads turned towards the doors in the back. They swung open to reveal Meemaw. She was being escorted by one of Sheldon's first cousins. She was followed by Mary, who was escorted down the aisle by Sheldon's brother. The ceremony had scarcely began, but Mary had that look on her face that mother's did when they were overcome with emotions. Tears couldn't be far behind. Amy's mother followed, also escorted by one of Amy's cousins.

There was a brief moment when the doors shut and when the opened again, Bernadette and Howard came down the aisle. Next were Missy and Raj, and then Leonard and Penny. Each couple separated once they reached the front of the station, and took their spots on either side of the aisle. A moment later, out walked Aditi alone, the pint-sized maid-of-honor, clasping her bouquet as she'd so thoroughly practiced, and smiling brightly from ear to ear.

The music stopped, the doors closed, and all fell silent. The doors made way for the woman of the hour:

Amy.

The lighting didn't change, no one moved and the bridal music sounded as loudly as ever. But in Sheldon's mind, everything in that moment—the music, the crowd, the very room itself—peeled away and all he could see was his bride coming to him. This is why people did it. This is why people had weddings. For that single, resplendent, glorious, breathtaking moment when the most beautiful woman in the room is yours.

"We are here today," the judge began, "to participate in a most joyous event and to celebrate one of life's greatest moments. We've gathered to witness the wedding of Sheldon Cooper and Amy Fowler. Now on days such as this one…"

As he continued his prepared statements, Amy got lost in the significance of the occasion. She tried to focus her eyes in front of her, on Judge Rembrandt, but her gaze kept drifting beside her, taken with the man that she would call her husband in a few short moments. She caught Sheldon glancing at her as well.

"Amy?"

At the sound of her name she turned towards the judge. He was smiling amiably at her. "Are you ready?"

Amy nodded. She'd lost track of where they were in the ceremony, but it was apparent they'd come to the vows.

"Do you, Amy," the judge began, "take Sheldon as your husband, to love him, cherish him, nurture him, and support him in times of joy and in times of difficulty, and promise with all your heart and soul to honor this vow till death do you part? If so, answer now, 'I do.'"

"I do."

"Do you, Sheldon, take Amy as your wife, to love her, cherish her, nurture her, and support her in times of joy and in times of difficulty, and promise with all your heart and soul to honor this vow till death do you part? If so, answer now, 'I do.'"

"I do."
The judge nodded. "Nicely done. Now each of you take the other by the hands."

Amy turned to Sheldon, as he did to her, and she lowered her hands into his outstretched palms, their arms suspended between them. They both looked back at the judge for further direction. "Amy, as you look at your groom, please recite your vows."

Amy looked Sheldon, took a deep breath and began to speak. "I, Amy Farrah Fowler, have chosen..." The words spilled out just as she'd rehearsed for days while tucked away in the solitude of her room. She was very glad she had memorized them, as she was so overcome with emotion, she felt she might faint otherwise. She could hear herself saying the words, and certain snatches of phrases jumped out more than others: committed, husband, companion, love. "... as long as we walk this earth." Just like that, she'd done it. She had declared her adoration, devotion and decision to be wed to one Sheldon Cooper. Now, it was his turn.

"Sheldon," the judge said, "as you look at your bride, please recite your vows."

Sheldon turned from the judge then looked at Amy, and he began to speak. "I, Sheldon Cooper..."

As the first words crossed his lips, she realized something that she hadn't known back when she was sitting, disheartened, in the family room. Standing in front of him now, watching him speak, she saw a man that was sure, certain and resolute. It's then she knew that the actual words he'd chosen mattered less than the conviction in which he said them. In Sheldon's eyes, she saw that conviction.

"...take you, Amy Farrah Fowler, to be my lawfully-wedded wife, to love—"

And then he stopped.

Amy thought he had simply paused for breath, or maybe for effect, as he had the occasional flare for the dramatic. It could be that he was trying to stifle a sneeze or cough. Perhaps his impeccable memory, in the pressure of the moment, had failed him after all. However, as the seconds ticked on, more upsetting reasons for his silence came to her. Maybe he was having second thoughts. Maybe he had cold feet. Maybe the conviction she thought she'd seen just moments before had given way to doubt.

A hushed murmur spread through the gathered throng. Just when Amy came close to hitching up her wedding dress, with both gloved hands, and making a break for the front door, Sheldon began to speak again.

"Amy, you've enriched my life in ways I couldn't have foreseen when I first met you years ago. Though once committed to living my life as a unit of one, I've found myself ever more surprised at how much I relish being one of a pair. I love you. Very much. I'm devoted to our marriage and I'm devoted to our family. You're the only woman I've ever loved, and I vow that as long as I have breath, you will be the only woman I ever will."

The words were characteristically unorthodox, but intensely genuine and deeply touching. Most of all, they were his. Amy could feel tears puddling under her eyes, and she could only hope that the no-run mascara that Penny had sworn by was holding up.

The judge spoke up. "Are there rings?"

The twins were originally charged with doing double duty as the ring bearers, but after a near-miss with Robert and Adam using the box for a game of catch during the rehearsal, Amy and Sheldon made the executive decision to carry the rings themselves. Sheldon pulled a box from his tuxedo
jacket and Amy from the concealed pockets in her dress. As they slipped the rings on each other's hands, the judge spoke.

"These rings are visible signs of their commitment to one another and of the unbroken circle of love. This love is freely given, with no beginning and no end, no giver and no receiver, for each is the giver and each is the receiver. May these rings always remind you of the vows you have taken today." He paused looking out over the crowd. "With the rings exchanged, should anyone here present know of any reason that this couple should not be joined in matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Amy heart stopped. She had specifically requested that he not ask that question since both of their families could hardly be trusted to keep their (often absurd) opinions to themselves. Besides, Amy didn't give a damn what anyone thought anyway.

The room (mercifully) remained silent.

"Excellent. Then, by the power vested in me by the state of California and Los Angeles County, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

At that moment Mary Cooper called out. "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

Sheldon glared at his mother, while the judge just chuckled a little. "Indeed." He turned to the groom, and extended his hand. "Sheldon, you may kiss the bride."

With an eagerness that was rarely seen in public, Sheldon took both sides of Amy's face in his hands and kissed her tenderly and long. The room was filled with applause and the recessional music began. The congregation rose to its feet and Sheldon and Amy, trailed by their children and closest friends, exited the train station.

As the newlyweds and the wedding party took pictures on the lawn, the invited guests mingled on the train platform for a pre-reception cocktail party. Meanwhile, the caterers and the companies from which they rented the tables, chairs, cutlery and linens took on the Herculean task of transforming the train station lobby into a dining room. It had taken hours of begging and arguing (and a hefty "convenience fee") to get the team to agree to such an unusual arrangement, but it had been worth it in the end. By the time the doors opened again and the wedding party entered, he and Amy were as pleased as two people could possibly be to find an ornate room and exquisite table settings with their dearest acquaintances seated all around them.

Howard was fumbling with his boutonniere after enthusiastically demolishing a non-kosher dinner, when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Are you Howard Wolowitz?" the woman asked.

"The one, the only," he answered.

"Well, your mother is in the restroom and she's asking for you."

"Great," Howard said with a groan. "I left my latex gloves at home."

As he approached the restroom, he was horrified to find a single file of persons at varying levels of urinary distress. He then realized that it was a unisex bathroom and apparently only serviced one person as a time. He marched to the front and pushed through the swinging door. There were a
handful of others waiting inside. It was a single stall bathroom with the sink on the side. Howard banged on the door.

"MA, HURRY UP! THERE'S ONLY ONE STALL AND YOU'VE BEEN IN THERE SO LONG A LINE IS FORMING!"

"OH HOWARD YOU'RE HERE. I NEED A LITTLE HELP. GO GET THE CHINESE ONE TO ZIP UP GRANDMA!"

"NONE OF THEM ARE CHINESE, MA!"

"HE SPEAKS CHINESE DOESN'T HE?"

"THAT'S BECAUSE THEY SPEAK CHINESE IN TAIWAN!"

"WHILE YOU'RE DOING ALL THAT GABBING, YOU COULD HAVE ALREADY SENT HIM IN!"

"I'M NOT SENDING IN ANYBODY, MA! YOU'RE NOT GOING TO VICTIMIZE MY CHILDREN THE SAME WAY YOU DID ME!" Howard yelled. A shudder ran through him. "ASK ONE OF YOUR FRIENDS. WHO'S AN ADULT. AND FEMALE."

"BUT MY FRIENDS CAN'T FIT UNDER THE STALL DOOR."

"THEN OPEN THE DOOR AND LET ONE IN."

"ARE YOU CRAZY? TWO PEOPLE CAN'T FIT IN HERE."

"THEN COME OUT HERE AND LET SOMEONE DO IT."

"AND PUT ALL MY BUSINESS IN THE STREET? I DON'T THINK SO!"

"YOU'RE NOT THINKING AT ALL!" he screamed.

Then there was a loud zipping noise. "Oh, what do you know?" Mrs. Wolowitz said. "I forgot that the zipper was on the side. Never mind."

Howard rolled his eyes and marched out.

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Just as the last of the wedding cake was going out and dancing seemed to be on the horizon, the loud sound of banging on glass could be heard.

Everyone turned around to see a tipsy Leonard standing on the soon-to-be dance floor.

"I'd like to toast the couple," he said. He walked over to the DJ table and grabbed a cordless microphone. The crowd wound down and came to attention. "When I got married," he said, "Sheldon told a rather unflattering story about an unfortunate bout I had with persistent diarrhea."

Penny, who had been in the corner talking to one of Amy's relatives who happened to be a casting agent for Warner Brothers, snapped her head around. "Excuse me," she said, and made a beeline for Leonard.

"...I mean, my diarrhea really wasn't that bad," he continued. "Sheldon was totally exaggerating. I mean, what do you expect from someone who had just spent a week in Mexico City for a Physics conference? I learned my lesson. Montezuma's Revenge is a bitch."
Penny grabbed Leonard's arm. "You're done," she said and reached for the mic, but he resisted her. "Wait, wait, wait," he said. "I'm not done. I have more to say."

"You're drunk and you're done."

"Not *that* drunk," he said.

"Come on, Leonard," she said, trying again to pull him from the floor, but he yanked his arm away. Frustrated, they looked at each other, caught in a stalemate.

"Let me do this, Penny." He was suddenly really serious.

Penny relented. "Fine, but don't say something you'll regret in the morning."

"I won't," Leonard said, and held the microphone back to his mouth. "When I first realized I might be expected to give a speech tonight, I immediately thought of that diarrhea story and honestly, I got a little upset. I started thinking about all the times that Sheldon and I bickered over where to sit in the apartment, or which brand of mustard to buy, or rides to doctor's appointments, or who got to be which character for Halloween. Pretty soon, though, I wasn't just thinking about us bickering, but other times, too. The Saturdays we spent watching *Doctor Who* marathons all day long. The time I went with him to Galveston and met all his family when he dad died. The time he took up for me when an old bully showed up for another round of torment. I thought of all the times we'd spent silently wrestling with scientific questions of the universe in tandem at our laptops. I thought of times I spent admiring his mother and times he spent admiring mine. Then I realized that, the truth of the matter is, for well over a decade, I've been lucky enough to never have to walk more than twenty feet to get to my best friend. And even though a lot of things have changed, I hope our status as best friends never does." He held up his glass. "Congratulations Sheldon and Amy."

Amy and Sheldon held up their glasses as well, and even from a distance, Leonard could see his friend was deeply moved.

He turned around to put the mic back on the table and saw Penny standing behind him weeping. "That was so sweet," she said blubbering. "I've never heard you talk so affectionately about Sheldon, before."

"Yeah," Howard said, putting his arm around Penny as they walked off the floor. "I'm definitely going to regret that in the morning."

As festivities wound down, Mary didn't. The social butterfly and family agent of unity, she was floating around catching up with old friends and family. Her feet were started to hurt, though and she crashed down next to the seated newlyweds. Aditi was sound asleep in Amy's lap, completely worn out from an evening of non-stop boogying and hopping around on the dance floor. Robert was likewise slumbering in the lap of his father, exhausted from a non-stop game of tag with the Wolowitz boys. Mary admired the scene warmly. "I thought this day would never come," she said, "but I believe in the power of prayer."

"As we all know," Sheldon muttered.

"So how does it feel to be *Mrs.* Cooper?"

"I will still go by Dr. Fowler," Amy replied.
"I know… professionally," Mary asked.

"And privately," Amy clarified. "Although I'm considering hyphenating it to Cooper-Fowler."

Mary was floored by this revelation. "Well that doesn't make any sense. What's the point in getting married if you're not even going to take his last name?"

"Oh, there were a few other considerations other than nomenclature," Sheldon said.

"At the very least," Amy said, "I can now be properly called his wife."

"And thank Jesus for that," Mrs. Cooper said. She walked up to Sheldon and, reaching over the sleeping boy in his lap gave him a hug. Sheldon used his free arm to hug her as well. Still embracing, Mary spoke. "I know I give you a hard time sometimes," she said, "but I love you and Amy very much and I hope you have a beautiful mar—" she stopped there. There was a hitch in her voice, and Sheldon could tell she was crying; it always made him feel uneasy when she did.

"I will, Mom," he said, tenderly, and looked at Amy.

"Good," she said standing up. She swatted away a tear. Just then, someone caught her eye. "Oh dear Lord, it has been a month of Sundays since I've seen Marian. Excuse me," she said and walked off.

As she took off, Beverly approached. Her presence was odd. Sheldon didn't remember inviting her.

"I don't know if you all consider it too early to bury the hatchet," she said, "but I would like to offer my cautious, though sincere, congratulations on your nuptials."

"Thank you," Sheldon and Amy mumbled. Their dispirited reply was not lost on her.

"In the even that that hatchet remains unburied," she said, "you should be happy to know that I will be returning to New Jersey tomorrow."

Robert, still asleep, suddenly turned over his father's lap, muttering to himself. "CHECKBOOK is the longest English word with horizontal symmetry," he said, then fell back asleep. It was a new thought for everyone present.

"Fascinating," Sheldon said.

"Your children are quite remarkable," Beverly said. "I envy the professionals who will be charged with their education. The potential for experimentation with academic techniques with those two is endless."

"Actually," Amy said, wearily, "we are in the process of sorting through their educational options right now. In the meantime, they'll be going to the Caltech daycare."

"That's odd," Beverly said, bemused. "I just assumed you would be putting them in Montessori school."

"Montessori school?" Sheldon asked. He looked at Amy with a confused look on his face.

Amy was also a bit puzzled. "Why would you assume that?" she asked Beverly.

"Well, the two of you are products of a public school education, so naturally you would begin there. Upon visiting your local 'kiddy mill', the public educational system did the only thing that they are good at, and tested the twins for their scholastic aptitude. You soon discovered that, to
your delight, both children are very smart, and Robert is exceptionally so. Such delight, however, was soon followed by the disconcerting realization that they would have to be educated separately. Amy—the de facto child researcher and educational director-in-chief of your family—plunged into the online world to research the topic, where she was greeted to a dizzying array of contradictory and impassioned opinions that often endorsed conflicting and counterintuitive advice. Sheldon—preoccupied with his work and blinded by his near-fetishization of intelligence—responded with an obstinate refusal to accept the reality of the situation. After ineffectual conversation and debate between the two of you—that even may have manifest itself in sexual malfunction in the relationship—you all arrived at an impasse. However, with the school year fast approaching, and an admirable unwillingness on the part of you two to remain in a state of discord, you came to the conclusion that the only factor that you both agreed on—that the children should not be separated—was the most important one. This insight caused you to explore ways where their joint education might be possible, and brought you to two options: public school, which is sub-par and horrifyingly ordinary, and Montessori school, the crown jewel of Italian childhood instruction and a world-renowned method of independent, mixed-age learning. The preferable option was obvious."

Sheldon and Amy looked at each other, and then back at Beverly.

"Your summation of events was absolutely remarkable, Beverly," he said, flabbergasted. "It was as if we had a soothsayer in our midst. That is, aside from the error about the related sexual malfunction in our relationship."

"Indeed," Amy agreed, "although, to date, we've only gotten as far as the impasse, unfortunately."

"Then, I'm afraid I've gotten ahead of myself," Beverly said. "Or rather, you all have been fatiguingly slow in reaching a rather forgone conclusion."

"Fear not," Sheldon said. Then he turned to Amy with a sudden decisiveness. "Given the uncanny insight Beverly has shown into the matter, I propose, Amy, that we accelerate the decision-making process and proceed directly to the obvious conclusion."

"Assuming that there is a suitable Montessori school in the area," Amy said, "I second that proposal."

"Rest assured," Beverly said, pulling her phone from her purse, "that in an area as infested with wealthy, entitled, helicopter parents as this one, Montessori schools are in abundance. I'll make a recommendation, just as soon as I take this call."

She rose putting the phone to her ear. "Shelby, I find your delay in returning my phone call unsettling. Had I been in a life-threatening situation, I would have long met my demise."

Missy walked up and gave her brother a hug. He received it awkwardly, patting her lightly on the back.

"So bro," she said, punching him lightly on the shoulder. "Where are you two lovebirds going to do for your honeymoon?"

Amy and Sheldon looked at each other. Considering their new jobs started in a mere matter of days, and the considerable expense connected with their new home and hasty weeding, a trip away at this point was impossible. But it was okay, really.

Amy smiled as she answered. "Start the rest of our lives."
TEN WEEKS LATER

In the weeks following the wedding, the lives of the Fowler-Coopers went into overdrive. Beverly had been instrumental in getting the children into a Montessori school just minutes away from the house, and they just barely managed to enroll in time for the new school session. After a tentative first few days, Robert and Aditi had become absolutely smitten with the school, teachers and fellow students alike. When Amy and Sheldon dropped them off each morning, they bolted from the car, hand in hand, and ran to the building. With the government project on indefinite hiatus, Sheldon had settled back into his old job, and long-neglected work was resumed and explored. More interestingly, he dug up his old notebook from the cute blue cottage on Mulberry Street; it just might hold promise for his future ambitions. Amy was acclimating well to her position in the Biology department at Caltech. She was pleasantly surprised, and bit intimidated, to find her new colleagues were welcoming and admiring of her work. Of course, there were new programs to learn, procedures to comply with and connections to be made, but she was relieved to learn that ultimately being a scientist was much like riding a bike. Besides, working at the same place as her husband was an added treat. The entire family was settling into the new house nicely, and as the weeks went on, carpet came up, wallpaper came down, and the box-strewn warehouse they had moved into started to resemble a comfortable home. Even Amy's dreams of hosting friends on their spacious patio (and engaging in spontaneous coitus in their spacious master bedroom) were slowly coming to fruition.

The other matter with Lise-Marie (that had caused them so much agony) was not yet resolved, but as she had offered a confession, there would be no trial. Amy and Sheldon had heard that her lawyers were working on a plea bargain. Either way, she'd be in prison for a long time.

All told, the dark events of yesterday were well in their past, and the future ahead of them was promising and bright. Before they realized it, November was upon them, and with it, the twins' birthday. Invitations were sent, ideas were brainstormed and cakes were ordered (one for each child). One Friday, after work, Sheldon, Amy and Penny—in a flurry of activity—bought supplies, decorated the family room with streamers and balloons and whipped up finger foods appropriate for a shin-dig for kids between the ages of two and seven.

The following morning, Robert and Aditi had come downstairs to a house that looked like it had been crashed into by the birthday fairy. Guests began to arrive around two in the afternoon, and Amy saw that children need no pretext to have fun. In minutes, the festivities were well underway. As the party ran itself in the family room, just beyond the kitchen bar, Penny worked on what was left of the dishes and Amy collected and threw out disposable cake plates, cups and utensils before the whole mess got away from them. As Penny scrubbed gook off a bowl, she nodded approvingly at Amy.

"This party really is a lot of fun," she said. "All the kids seem to be having a great time." Her statement was punctuated by the sounds of giggling and squeals from the small guests.

Amy nodded, tying up a trash bag. "They do seem to be enjoying themselves."

Penny brightened up with a thought. "I must admit, when you said the birthday theme would be the musculoskeletal system, I had my doubts. I have to say, though, that it all looks really nice. The bone-shaped gummy bears were a nice touch."

"Thank you," Amy said. "The theme was Robert's idea, and Aditi had no objections. He is generally fascinated with Biology—a fact Sheldon is still wrestling with—but recently, Robert seems to be partial to osteopathic medicine."
Penny had no idea what that was, but didn't want to risk asking why. She put a cupcake tin on the drying rack. "I can't wait until I can do this with Baby Leonard."

Amy sighed and shook her head. "It's coming faster than you think."

Just then, Aditi walked up. "Can I have some sarcoplasmic fluid?" she asked.

"May I have some sarcoplasmic fluid, please," Amy said, as a gentle reminder.

"May I have some sarcoplasmic fluid, please," Aditi said.

"Sure." Amy ladled her daughter a cup of fruit punch. As she did, Aditi walked over to Penny.

"May you pick me up, Aunt Penny?" she asked. "Please," she added.

Penny looked down, her face reflecting her regret. "I'm washing the dishes sweetie, so I can't. I'm sorry."

Amy handed Aditi the punch, and the little girl took a big gulp of the cherry drink. "May you pick me up Mommy, please?" asked.

"I can't. I'm busy cleaning up," she explained.

Aditi was a bit dismayed by two rejections, but not defeated. She spotted Leonard who had parked next to (and had just about finished off) the bowl of Cheetos. He was rocking Baby Leonard, who was in the car seat on the floor, with his foot.

"Uncle Leonard," she asked, her voice more pitiful than normal. "May you pick me up, please?"

Leonard looked down at the baby, who was sound asleep, and then brushed his hands together, raining Cheetos crumbs onto the floor. "Sure," he said, but Amy intervened before he could. She walked over to where Aditi was and stooped down in front of her.

"Aditi, how old are you now?"

"FIVE!" she said, excitedly.

"And that makes you what?"

"A BIG GIRL!" she said, so thrilled she was bouncing up and down.

"Right!" Amy said. "But big girls don't want to be held all the time like Baby Leonard. They walk on their own two feet."

This was not the conclusion to the line of questioning that Aditi had anticipated. She dropped her head down, pouting. "I don't want to be a big girl," she said.

Amy delicately rubbed her daughter's face. "Sure you do. Because big girls get to go to school and have birthday parties with all their classmates. Look!" Amy pointed back at the raging party going on in the family room: kids jumping, running, batting at balloons and playing with party favors. Aditi's face brightened some. Robert suddenly stood up from the floor and turned his head about, searching for something or someone. "Robert is looking for you," Amy said.

Aditi immediately perked up and took off towards her brother. "I'm right here!" she yelled as she ran.
Amy smiled to herself at the scene of the two crashing into each other and getting lost in whatever they were playing on the floor. She stood up and realized that Sheldon had returned and was standing right next to her. He was watching the scene as well. There was a look of melancholy in his eyes.

"Can I still hold her sometimes?" he asked.

Amy knew exactly what he was feeling. The truth was, the twins simply were growing up much too fast. She touched his arm. "Of course you can." She stuck her head out and peeked down the hall. "Is it ready?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Amy grabbed one of the toy whistles off the counter and blew into it. The whole room came to attention.

"We have come to the moment you've all been waiting for: the unwrapping of the gifts!"

All the children stood up and the twins jumped up and down with delight. "They are stacked in three piles in the living room: Aditi's gifts, Robert's gifts and gifts for the both of you. Are you ready?"

"YEEEAFAHHH!" they shouted in unison.

"Okay," Amy said, gesturing with her hand, "then go ahead."

Robert and Aditi grabbed hands and then ran for the living room. A small army of children raced off behind them. The parents in attendance pulled themselves from the walls and the chairs that were supporting them, and then filed out behind the kids. As the room emptied, Amy looked up at Sheldon.

"Thank you," she said.

Sheldon shrugged. "Separating boxes and gift bags into piles is a very simple task, although I must say that the handwriting of some of the guests is absolutely illegible."

"No, not that," Amy said. "I mean thank you… for everything. For being a great dad. A great husband. A great man."

Sheldon was notorious for being more than a little conceited, but most people didn't know that when he was directly praised with deep sincerity, he got uncomfortable.

"Thank you," he muttered, a little embarrassed. "I just want you to be happy."

"I am," she said. "Very much." She took Sheldon's hand, and clung to his arm. She noticed a faint smile on his face.

Aditi reappeared, fidgety and anxious. "MOMMY! DADDY!" she yelled. She grabbed Sheldon's hand and started pulling. "Come on!"

Smiling at each other, they walked off behind her to join the others in the living room.

THE END
ENDNOTE: Thus, we've come to the end. I would like to thank all my loyal readers who kept clicking [ NEXT > ] chapter after chapter, and stuck it out when the highs were high and the lows were low. I'd like to thank Lionne6, who is not only a kick-ass beta, but my personal grammar grump, mental healthcare worker, character analyst, cheerleader and whatever the hell else she had to be to me through the writing process. Finally, last but CERTAINLY not least, I like to thank the readers who actually take a moment to leave a review. People like you make the world go 'round and mean more to me than you know. If you are a reader and we haven't met yet, drop me a note in the comments section. THANK YOU, see you around the fandom and LLTS!

End Notes

Save a plotbunny; LEAVE FEEDBACK! Also, my betas (Lionne6 and In the dark. Follow the Son) are made of everything that is awesome. Give them cookies.

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