# Chapter 1: A Budding Romance

**Scene #1: Everything is on Track for Sarah**

Life was good, Sarah thought, as she found solace in her academic haven, the undergrad library. Sipping her favorite cup of coffee, she immersed herself in a compelling audio seminar, reflecting on the flawless execution of her well-laid college plan. The serenity of the moment wrapped around her like a warm embrace, and she reveled in the sense of accomplishment. Little did she know that within minutes, a twist of fate was poised to enter her life, altering the course of her day, her semester, and quite possibly, her very destiny.

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**Scene #2: Sarah is Late for Class**

The Undergrad Library, with its unique underground design, had been a place of solace for many University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign students. The University had made a deliberate choice to construct the library below ground level, a testament to the respect they held for the adjacent historic Morrow Plots. The Undergrad Library’s subterranean architecture ensured that no shadow tainted the historic plots above.

Inside the library, the relentless fluorescent lighting illuminated Sarah Wilkins as she sat engrossed in her audio seminar. International business strategies... There’s so much potential here, she thought. The seminar’s captivating insights into the expansion of businesses on a global scale played through her earbuds, drowning out the muted hum of student conversations and the distant rustling of pages.

For Sarah, a teacher’s assistant in the throes of her academic journey, this library had been a regular haunt. Today, she had settled into one of the study tables, surrounded by her books and notes. As a dedicated TA, Sarah was responsible for guiding the first-year students through the fundamentals of Business-101.

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**Scene #3: Evan and Guido in the Quad**

The Quad at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign sprawled like a lush green carpet under the sun. Majestic oaks and maples lined its periphery, their leaves rustling softly in the gentle breeze. Students lounged on the grass, engrossed in their books or chatting animatedly in groups, while others meandered along the pathways. The sky was a canvas of vivid blue, and the sun painted everything with a golden hue. It was the kind of morning that infused the soul with energy, and the Quad pulsated with the vibrancy of college life.

“Hey, Evan! Think fast!” Guido shouted, sending the Frisbee soaring toward Evan with a wicked curve.

Evan moved effortlessly, intercepting the disc with a graceful leap. “Man, you’re getting rusty!” he called out, his voice dripping with mock derision.

Guido laughed, adjusting his cap. “Maybe if you spent as much time on the field as you do in the library, you’d have a challenge here.”

Evan smirked, “Trying to get on Liz’s good side, you know. A promise is a promise.” He tossed the Frisbee back, his mind briefly flitting to his sister’s encouraging smile.

“Ah, the great Evan Vaughn, tamed by a promise to his sister,” Guido teased, catching the disc. “You know, most guys are trying to escape the library, not run toward it.”

Evan chuckled, picking up his backpack from the grass. “She believes in me, man. I don’t want to let her down. Besides,” he winked, “some of us need to hit the books to keep up. Not all of us have your natural... charm.”

Guido feigned a dramatic gasp. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

With a final laugh and wave, Evan began his departure from the Quad, energized by the day’s perfection and a commitment he intended to honor. The playful banter with Guido still echoing in his mind, the path ahead felt light and hopeful.

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**Scene #4: Evan And Sarah Kiss**

Sarah bolted from the library, earbuds blaring, eyes wide with the impending doom of lateness. The library steps loomed ahead, a sudden drop just waiting for the unwary, and she was just the kind of unwary the steps had in mind.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Evan. He was just another student, someone she hadn’t met before. But he had spotted her imminent tumble, her focus diverted to the chaotic thoughts swirling in her mind.

“Hey, lady in the skirt suit!” he shouted, loud enough to catch everyone’s attention except the lady in the skirt suit.

His legs propelled him forward, closing the gap between them with an urgency that matched her own. His arms enveloped her just as her foot missed the first step, the momentum of her hurried escape carrying them in a wild twirl. Her briefcase and purse took flight, flinging their contents everywhere. Her glasses escaped from her face, spiraling to the ground.

Her hair fell in a cascade of wavy blonde hair as the barrette that held it surrendered to the force of their twirl. As she leaned back into him, almost parallel to the ground, Evan could see that she was not a professor as he had initially thought, but a student like himself.

Their eyes locked, a silent conversation passing between them. “I feel like I should kiss you,” Evan said, his words floating in the space between them. Sarah’s eyes sparkled with a mix of amusement and surprise, and she responded, “I’m not going to stop you.”

Their lips met in a passionate kiss that seemed to suspend time, making the world outside their embrace fade away. After the kiss, Evan helped her to her feet, a newfound softness in his gaze.

Suddenly, reality came rushing back to her, and she remembered her lateness. She quickly gathered her scattered belongings with Evan’s help.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

Flustered, she replied, “I have to go. I’m late!”

“That’s a strange name,” he joked, but the humor was lost on her. She was too caught up in her rush, her mind a whirlwind of confusion.

She dashed away, unknowingly leaving her broken glasses behind. Evan picked them up and called after her, but she was already disappearing into the distance. Evan was left standing there, a lighthearted grin on his face and her glasses in his hand, looking forward to the future encounter that their unexpected meeting promised.

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**Scene #5: Sarah is Frazzled**

The classroom was a microcosm of order and structure, juxtaposed with the youthful energy of the students filling it. As the wall clock ticked, the students’ faces mirrored their confusion, their eyes flicking to the vacant podium, to the ticking clock, then back to the podium. Where was their punctual teacher’s assistant, Sarah Wilkins?

Then, the door swung open, and there she was, Sarah. Except she was different. Her usually neat hair was let down, her eyes were bare without the usual frame of glasses, and there was a flush to her cheeks that was never there before.

With a silent apology mirrored in her expression, she straightened her outfit, straightened herself, and stepped towards the podium. “I apologize for being late. It will not happen again. Today we will review topics we’ve covered for next week’s exam,” she declared. Her voice, though steady, had an unfamiliar softness to it.

While Sarah wrote on the board, a student raised his hand. “Ms. Wilkins, we have never discussed that material,” he pointed out.

Sarah’s eyes widened a tad, realization slowly dawning on her. There was a beat of silence before she let out a soft laugh, clearing her throat. “Did you ever have one of those days where something happens that you didn’t expect, and it throws you off your game?” she asked, leaning against her desk in a relaxed pose, the air around her lightening.

Nods and smiles of understanding echoed around the room. It was a rare glimpse of Sarah, the person, not just Sarah, their teacher’s assistant.

“Today is one of those days for me,” she admitted, a touch of color staining her cheeks. “Let me tell you a secret about exams. 80% of the questions simply test your memorization. The other 20% are laced with trick questions to gauge how thoroughly you understand the material. Let’s focus on the trick questions instead of wasting time on simple memorization. I think this will give everybody a better chance to ace this exam. Is everyone agreeable to that?”

The room erupted in unanimous approval. For once, excitement echoed through the room, as opposed to the usual resignation. The rest of the class flowed easily, a stark difference from their usual sessions.

As the class emptied, one student, Katie Andrews, approached Sarah. “Ms. Wilkins, I wanted to say how much I enjoyed our class today. Whatever happened, I hope will happen again next week!”

The corner of Sarah’s lips twitched upwards, her heart swelling in her chest. With a nod and a warm smile, she looked at Katie, her thoughts echoing Katie’s sentiments. Me too.

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**Scene #6: Evan Hopes for Sarah's Return**

Evan stood just outside the entrance of the undergrad library, his heart still pounding from the kiss. He glanced down at the spectacles in his hand, a silent testament to the whirlwind event that had occurred just minutes prior. All thoughts of studying had fled; Sarah was the only subject matter on his mind now.

His feet began to trace the pathway to the Morrow Plots, almost on autopilot, as his mind played out the scenarios of Sarah returning. He visualized her surprise upon seeing him there, remembering their passionate kiss. The fantasy was tantalizing. He did not stray too far, lingering near the sight of their fateful encounter.

Evan paced, his eyes scanning the area for a hint of Sarah. One hour passed, then another. She did not return. Disappointment crept in, but with it came a renewed determination. He would mend her glasses, return to the same spot tomorrow. He hoped fate or Sarah's schedule would be consistent.

With his newfound resolution, Evan sought out his friend Guido, his steps carrying him toward The Quad. As expected, Guido was in the midst of his own adventure, attempting to charm two sophomore coeds.

Yanking Guido away from his endeavor, Evan said, "I gotta tell you something!" His voice echoed his excitement.

"Why'd you do that?" Guido protested, his bravado still on display. "I had those two in the palm of my hand."

Ignoring Guido's typical exaggeration, Evan blurted out, "I just kissed the most beautiful, amazing, wonderful woman in the world!"

Guido responded with skepticism, a hint of sarcasm edging his words. "Sure you did."

Undeterred, Evan pressed on, relaying the entirety of his story, brandishing Sarah's glasses like a prized trophy. Guido laughed, his surprise echoing through The Quad. Seeing Sarah's glasses were broken, Guido said, "That must've been one hell of a kiss!"

"It was!" Evan's voice was soft, reverent. "I think I will call her Cinderella. Instead of leaving a glass slipper, she left eyeglasses."

Guido raised an eyebrow, visibly taken aback. "You kissed a girl Before even getting her name? That's not like you, bro."

Evan shrugged, his face lighting up with the memory of the encounter. "The Universe dropped her on my lap, and I had to go for it."

"And now?" Guido asked, ever the pragmatic.

"I’m going to fix her glasses and try to find her tomorrow. Do you have an eyeglass repair kit?"

Guido's gaze fell on Evan like he'd lost his mind. "Sure, I got one in my back pocket," he quipped.

"I should be able to find one at the mall. You want to come with?" Evan asked.

"Nah," Guido glanced across The Quad at a student reading on a blanket in the grass, "I see a lonely lady over there that looks like she needs a visit from 'The Guido.’"

And with that, they parted ways, Evan headed towards his car with a newfound mission and a heart brimming with anticipation. Despite the uncertainty of whether he would find Sarah the next day, he felt an unusual sense of excitement, like he was on the brink of something truly wonderful.

# Chapter 2: Evan Charmed Sarah

**Scene #7: Waiting Game**

Evan stood under the dreary clouds, a gray blanket unfurling across the morning sky. The location, the same place where he and Sarah first kissed, filled him with a sense of hopeful anticipation. It was Friday, the day after the unforgettable kiss, and he found himself drawn back, a hopeful pilgrim to a shrine of his own making.

He oscillated between hope and disappointment like a pendulum, his heart racing every time a blonde head appeared in his peripheral vision or the doors to the undergrad library swung open. Yet, each time, it wasn’t her. The figure would solidify into a stranger, and the library doors would admit someone else, causing his heart to drop in his chest.

As the minutes turned into hours, the weather started to mirror his gloom. The rain began, a soft drizzle that escalated steadily, soaking through his jacket. He darted between trees and awnings, attempting to stay dry, but he wouldn’t stray far from his post. His need for a direct view of the library doors and the place of their first kiss kept him exposed to the elements. The rain, initially a light mist, grew heavier, each drop echoing his mounting despair.

Two hours into his vigil, the figure of Guido appeared. His friend stood next to him, huddled in his own jacket, his eyebrows raised in inquiry. “No luck?”

Evan lowered his gaze, his voice barely audible against the patter of the rain. “No, I haven’t seen her.”

Guido clapped a hand on his shoulder, his gruff voice breaking through Evan’s reverie. “Sorry, bro. Don’t stress it. There are plenty of fish in the sea.”

Evan shook his head. “I don’t want to fish in the sea. She’s the only one for me.”

“You ever consider, bro, that maybe she didn’t show up because she has a boyfriend?” Guido turned to Evan, a pragmatic expression etched on his face..

“I just can’t see it, Guido.” Evan shook his head, his expression thoughtful.

“You’ve said she’s a stunner, right?” Guido arched a questioning eyebrow.

Evan’s eyes softened, his voice quiet. “She transcends stunning. Her face... it’s angelic.”

“Then isn’t it possible some other dude’s claimed that angel for himself?” Guido pointed out, punctuating his words with a slight shrug.

“I can’t believe she would’ve kissed me if so. But there’s something more...” Evan’s gaze drifted off, lost in memory. “The way she looked at me, something in her eyes, it felt like... like she was meant to be mine.”

Guido, bemused by Evan’s impassioned response, ribbed him further. “Man, what’s so spectacular about this girl? She packin’ triple D’s or something?”

Evan halted, throwing Guido a pointed look. His tone sharpened, “Guido, knock it off. She’s not just some random girl. She’s exceptional. Show some respect, dude!”

Guido raised his hands defensively, a grin still pulling at his lips. “Alright, alright,” he said, chuckling slightly. “Didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. My bad.” He stepped back slightly, folding his arms across his chest, his fingers tapping a playful beat against his biceps. “I don’t get you, dude. You got women lined up to be with you, and you’re stressing over a girl whose name you don’t know? You should adopt my style – no strings attached, no drama.”

“Yeah, and no hope for love,” Evan retorted, his voice heavy.

Guido chuckled again, but his tone was softer, almost affectionate. “My friend, ever the hopeless romantic.”

Evan sighed, frustration creeping into his voice. “I’m not a hopeless romantic. I’m just... I’m just...just…” He trailed off, unable to find the words. After a moment, he added, “I don’t know what I am. I just know that I have to see my Cinderella again.”

Guido patted his back again, a grin spreading across his face. “Let’s leave the matching glass slipper search for another day. Come on, let’s head back to our place. We’ll knock down a few beers and watch baseball. The Cubs actually have a chance for the playoffs this year!”

Guido’s words seemed to echo in the void around Evan, but they didn’t seem to stir him from his spot.

Guido persisted, “You’ll feel a lot better with a cold brew in your hand and a Cubs victory on the TV. I’ll tell you what, after the game, we’ll try to figure a way to get her name.”

Still, Evan remained silent, a statue against the rain and gloom.

Guido’s joking tone made a comeback, “How hard can it be to find the most beautiful girl on campus?”

That finally managed to pull a small smile from Evan. “I suppose you’re right. I’ll bump into her sooner or later.”

Guido nodded, giving Evan’s shoulder one last squeeze. “Exactly! Let’s chill at home, and we’ll scour the Internet when the game is over.”

Guido started back towards their home, his voice trailing behind him, still filled with humor and lightness. Evan followed, but his steps were slow, reluctant. As the rain continued to fall, mingling with the sadness in his eyes, he cast one last lingering glance at the library doors. The weight of disappointment hung heavy in his chest, a dull ache that seemed to echo the emptiness of the deserted path where he had once found love, however fleeting.

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**Scene #8: Evan Calls Liz for Advice**

Evan’s alarm blared for the third time that morning. It was already 11 AM, and he had snoozed the alarm repeatedly. On a typical Saturday, he would be up by 8 o’clock for a morning jog and workout. But today was different. A shadow of disappointment hung heavily over him; he hadn’t found Sarah since their kiss two days ago. Even a Friday night Cubs’ victory couldn’t lift his spirits. Feeling helpless, he’d earlier asked Guido to cover his client training sessions for the afternoon.

With a sigh, Evan finally pushed himself out of bed, feeling the weight of desperation settle on him. He needed advice, guidance. He needed the reassuring voice of the person who was always there for him—his sister, Liz. Grabbing his phone, he dialed her number and waited, his heart thumping in his chest.

“Hello?” Liz’s voice crackled from the other end, and she pretended she didn’t know who the caller was, adding a touch of humor to her tone.

“Hey, Liz, do you have a few minutes to talk?” Evan asked, feeling the relief of hearing his sister’s voice.

“I’m sorry, who is this?” she continued to tease.

“Um, it’s Evan.”

“Hmm, that name doesn’t ring a bell.”

Evan couldn’t help but smile, despite his downer mood. “Quit teasing. It’s Evan Vaughn, your brother.”

“Oh, now I remember. It’s been forever since I’ve heard from my little brother.”

“It’s only been a couple of weeks.”

“Six weeks, to be exact. What’s up? Are you feeling okay? Are you still having those energy drop issues?”

Evan felt a twinge of irritation at the question. In the last year or two, he had periods where his energy dropped significantly, sometimes lasting for a couple of hours, sometimes a couple of days. A concerned Liz often asked about his health, causing him to feel like she was nagging him.

“No, I haven’t had any problems,” Evan deflected.

“I wish you would go to the doctor and get checked out.”

“You know how I feel about most doctors. They get kickbacks from pharmaceutical companies. They’re chomping at the bit to prescribe drugs when most of the time, all that is needed is proper diet and exercise.”

“You and your fear of doctors. I’ll never understand.”

“I’ve seen more than one friend or family get addicted to prescribed painkillers and antidepressants. You’ve seen it too.”

“I’m asking you to go to the doctor, not get addicted to painkillers.”

“I’m fine, Liz. Please stop worrying. We have to get a physical every six months for work, and I just got mine a few weeks ago. I got a clean bill of health.”

“I would’ve known that if you had called me,” Liz said, her voice tinged with teasing. Liz and Evan never fought or got angry with each other, but they did like to tease each other.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been busy with school and work –”

Interrupting, Liz added, “And sports and parties and girls.”

Evan laughed at his sister’s accuracy.

“That’s what I called to talk about, girls. Well, one girl in particular. I think she’s the one.”

Liz’s ears perked up. “The one? Do tell.”

“I literally bumped into her on the way to the library. She was in a rush and headed for a hard fall. I was lucky enough to get there in the knick of time before she hit the ground. Next thing I know, we’re kissing. Oh my God, Liz. It was the best kiss of my life.”

“What a wonderful way to meet! Tell me more about her.”

“That’s the thing, Liz; I know nothing about her. She ran away without so much as giving me her name.”

“Why do you think she ran away? Was she upset you kissed her?”

“No, Liz, you taught me always to be respectful. In the heat of the moment, I told her I wanted to kiss her. And she said I could. So I did!”

“I’m proud of you for being respectful. But then, why did she run?”

“I wish I knew. Guido thinks she has a boyfriend, but I said no way that’s true. I think she ran because she was late for class. At least, I hope that was the reason. I waited for her to return, but she never showed. I returned the next day, and still, she didn’t show.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much. You know what I always say.”

“Yeah, I know. If it’s meant to be, it will be,” Evan said, his voice infused with the mild annoyance of having heard the phrase a million times before.

“But Liz, there is something special about this girl. I am desperate to find her. I know it’s too soon to be sure, but I feel she’s the one for me.”

“I know it’s hard to be patient. But I’m telling you, Evan, the harder you look, the less likely that you’ll find her. When you stop looking, she’ll appear. That’s just how these things work.”

“Guido said as much. He said I looked pathetic getting soaked, waiting for her in the rain, and then spending hours online last night desperately trying to find her with no luck.”

“I wish I were there to give you a hug. You’re not pathetic for enthusiastically seeking love. But Guido is right to some extent; go back to enjoying life. You put in the effort to find her, and that’s a good thing, a great thing. But it’s not healthy to become obsessive in your pursuits.”

“I know you’re right. I want to meet her again. I never wanted anything as much in my life.”

“Do you really think she may be the one?”

“I don’t think it; I know it!”

“Then carry that confidence with you until you find her. If it’s meant to be, you will find her!” Liz said, her tone empowering and confident.

Liz’s words pumped up Evan, infusing him with renewed hope and energy. “You’re right! I’m not gonna be pathetic, desperately seeking Sarah. We are meant to be, and the universe will bring her to me again.”

“Now that’s the Evan I know! I know you’re going to find her. I’ve never heard you call any girl ‘the one.’ And I’m especially impressed you met her on the way to the library!” They both laughed at the library comment.

“That just proves how awesome my sister is. I never would’ve met her if you didn’t make me promise to keep my grades up.”

“I can’t take the credit. But now that you mention it, are you keeping your grades up?” Liz teased.

Teasingly, Evan changed the subject without answering her. “No time to talk, Liz; gotta get ready for work.” Liz laughed at Evan’s evasive response.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ll call you. Gotta run; love you, sis!”

“I love you too.”

He hung up the phone, his heart lighter, his spirit renewed. A rejuvenated Evan Evan texted Guido, letting him know that he didn’t need him to cover his client sessions. He felt great, and he knew, deep in his soul, that he would find Sarah again.

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**Scene #9: Evan is a Man With a Plan**

Evan maneuvered his aged Subaru down the university streets, the compact SUV humming with the consistency only an old reliable car could offer. The sun painted a fresh coat of brightness over the day, streaks of light dancing on the dashboard, the weather reminiscent of the day he’d met Sarah. An energetic tune played from the radio, matching his cheerful demeanor. He found himself tapping along, humming the lyrics under his breath, the Cubs’ three-game winning streak and yesterday’s softball victory lending an extra beat to his rhythm.

Infused with inspiration from his sister, Evan woke up Monday with an idea burning bright in his mind. It was as if the universe had conspired overnight, offering him a hint, a spark of insight that felt like the missing piece of a complex puzzle. He’d remembered Sarah’s scholarly attire, her intelligent aura. He’d speculated she might be a bookworm. And where do bookworms hide? He laughed at the obviousness of it all. The library.

An air of confidence billowed around Evan, his chest swelled with newfound hope. He wasn’t going to wait around, moping, and hoping for her appearance. If she wasn’t at their first meeting spot, he’d plunge into the depths of the undergrad library, the refuge of bookworms and study enthusiasts. His gut feeling told him he’d find her there.

Pulling into a parking spot, Evan cut the engine, letting the last few notes of the energetic song fade. He opened the car door, a rush of early fall air filling his lungs, crisp with the promise of new beginnings. There was an excited skip to his step, an ease in his manner as he locked the vehicle and turned towards the library. His heart held no room for anxiety, only a serene confidence. He was a man with a plan. He felt like he was walking in stride with destiny itself, and it was impossible not to share in his assurance. With one last deep breath, he set off, ready to conquer the day.

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**Scene #10: Sarah Can't Concentrate**

The Undergraduate Library was abuzz with the clatter of keystrokes, the murmur of hushed conversations, and the low hum of fluorescent lights overhead. It was a cocoon of industry, a hive of collegiate life, and its energy was as palpable as it was contagious. Groups of students huddled around tables, their brows furrowed in concentration, their voices a soft chatter. In the corners, amidst the maze of books, the library also nurtured tentative friendships and budding flirtations.

Yet, today, for Sarah, the lively hum and vibrant buzz were background noise. She was elsewhere, trapped in her thoughts, her mind a whirlpool of images and sensations, all converging on one moment – the kiss.

Sarah had always been a disciplined student. She prided herself on her ability to block out distractions, to focus, to absorb the information that swam across the pages in front of her. But today, every line she read, every fact she tried to internalize, it all blurred into an indistinguishable mass, drowned out by the memory of a unexpected kiss.

Why is this happening to me? Sarah wondered. She nervously fidgeted with her glasses, cleaning the lenses more out of habit than necessity. But the lenses weren’t the problem. It was the relentless film that played on the screen of her mind, a replay of an unexpected, yet passionately heart-stopping kiss.

In an attempt to shake off her mental fog, she started to tidy her work area. Pens were aligned, notebooks stacked, eraser bits brushed away. She picked up her purse and methodically checked its contents, putting everything back in a precise order.

In the back of her mind, the logical part of her brain told her to snap out of it, to regain her focus. It reminded her of her vow to keep romantic entanglements at bay. But the other part, the part that seemed to be in control today, yearned for more. More of the mystery man, more of his touch, more of the sparks that had ignited between them.

I have to get back to my work, she admonished herself as she roamed the aisles aimlessly, her fingers running over the spines of books she had no intention of reading.

The tension was building, a mix of frustration and yearning. In a small act of surrender to her distracted state, she gathered her hair, twisting it into a bun at the top of her head. It was an unconscious act, an echo of countless study sessions in the past.

Is this what attraction to the masculine feels like? Sarah mused, her heart pounding a little faster as the memory of the kiss washed over her again. How does a woman get any work done?

Sarah, the diligent student, the disciplined scholar, was facing a new challenge. It wasn’t an academic hurdle or an intellectual puzzle. It was something far more uncontrollable, far more overwhelming. It was desire. And she was lost in it, unable to find her way back to the safety of her books. For the first time in her academic career, she was grateful for her habitual over-preparedness. But even that relief was fleeting, swept away by a new wave of memories and longing.

She was no longer just Sarah, the focused student, the valedictorian. She was Sarah, the woman yearning for a man’s touch, Sarah, who craved for just one more kiss. It was a struggle, an internal tug-of-war that left her reeling and distracted. The library, once a sanctuary of knowledge, had become the stage for her emotional unrest, a symbol of the turmoil within her. And she had no idea how to handle it.

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**Scene #11: Evan Finds Sarah at the library**

Sarah settled back into her regular spot at the undergrad library, the weight of her studies pressing on her mind. She made yet another effort to immerse herself in her work. The pages of her book offered a brief escape, but a familiar sensation made her skin tingle. The very air around her seemed to shift.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted him: the mystery man she’d shared that unexpected kiss with. Their eyes met, and a mix of anxiety and excitement surged within her. She tried to hide behind her book, but her attempt was feeble at best.

His presence drew nearer until she could no longer pretend not to notice. She took a deep breath and peeked at him from behind her book. Those eyes, so intense and yet playful, met hers. The world seemed to pause for a split second.

He held out a pair of glasses—the ones she thought she’d never see again. They were fixed. As she nodded her permission, her heart raced, and she closed her eyes, feeling the gentle touch of his fingers as he replaced her glasses with the repaired pair. She could feel the warmth of his hands, even though they barely brushed against her skin.

His voice broke the silence. “Ah, much better. Not that there’s anything wrong with the glasses you were wearing, but I like these a lot better. I hope I did a good job fixing them?”

Trying to maintain her composure, she replied, “Yes, you did. Thank you. How much do I owe you?”

“You don’t owe me anything! But you can join me for a snack at the food court. We could call it an energy exchange?” he countered, his tone playful.

Sarah hesitated, torn between her responsibilities and the undeniable pull she felt towards him. “I have studying to do.”

“Well, I have to study too!” Evan declared.

His persistence was both vexing and endearing. When he vanished momentarily only to return to the seat across from her and read a book upside down, she couldn’t help but be amused.

“Do you always read your books upside down?” Sarah queried, her eyebrow hitched up in amusement.

With an exaggerated gasp, Evan flipped the book, a playful grin dancing on his lips. “Ah, now this book makes more sense!”

Chuckles bubbled up from Sarah’s throat as she glimpsed the title, Female Poets of the 19th Century. “Really? You don’t look like a poetry major to me.”

With a swift nod and a spark in his eyes, Evan replied, “I love the female poets of the 19th century.”

Arching her brow in a silent challenge, Sarah shot back, “Can you even name one?”

Not missing a beat, Evan exclaimed, “Emily Dickinson!”

A smirk curled Sarah’s lips as she teased, “Do you really know that, or is she the only female poet you’ve heard of?”

Evan leaned back, a chuckle escaping him. “I am an expert on female poetry from the 19th century!”

A soft laugh from Sarah echoed around them. “You are, are you? Okay then, what is your favorite poem?”

Before he could glance down at his safety net, Sarah commanded, “Close the book. Okay, now tell me your favorite poem.”

A whimsical story spilled from Evan’s lips, an almost poetic cadence to his voice. “Well, I can’t remember who wrote it, but I remember the name. It’s called The Kiss. It’s a poem about this beautiful coed saved from certain death by a valiant young man. They have this most amazing kiss. But then she disappears like Cinderella at midnight. He ultimately finds her, and she futilely attempts to resist his charming ways.”

An intrigued smile formed on Sarah’s face. “Hmm, interesting. So how does the poem end?”

Evan replied with a confident air, “Happily ever after, of course!”

Evan’s charm weakened her resolve as she attempted to refocus on her study material. His antics continued. He opened the book again and altered his facial expression and voice to mimic a distinguished professor.

He pretended to critique a poem. “Very nice. Excellent poetic structure. Great use of hyperbole.”

She couldn’t suppress her laughter. His comic faux critique of a poem was the last straw. “You are going to keep annoying me until I agree to go to the food court, aren’t you?”

Evan countered, his eyes wide in mock surprise, “Annoying? I was shooting for charming!”

Sarah surrendered to a full-blown laugh. “Okay, fine, annoyingly charming.”

They bantered back and forth. His sincerity shone through when he said, “I’ll stop bothering you if you want. But I say let’s get to know each other. Unless I imagined it, that kiss was wonderful for you, too. All I’m asking for is fifteen minutes. That’s it, just fifteen minutes of your time! What do you say?”

She sighed, admitting defeat—not to him, but to the chemystery between them. “Alright, fifteen minutes it is!”

As she gathered her things, he gracefully gestured for her to lead the way. As they approached the exit, Evan quickly moved to her side with a smooth and courteous maneuver, reaching the door just ahead of her. With a kind smile, he held it open, allowing her to pass through first. The door closed behind them, marking the beginning of an unexpected journey, filled with potential and promise.

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**Scene #12: Evan and Sarah Food Court Date**

Evan had been strategic, leading Sarah on a route that unavoidably passed the spot of their first kiss. He paused there, gazing at her with an intensity that made her heart thump against her ribs. “I’ve been waiting to kiss you again since the first moment I saw you today,” he confessed, his voice rough.

Gently, Evan’s fingers curled around hers, the sensation setting a tremor of awareness coursing through her. “Come with me,” he suggested, his voice as soft and alluring as the hold he had on her hand.

Sarah recoiled slightly, confusion flickering in her eyes. “What are you doing?” she asked, her tone wavering between uncertainty and curiosity.

“I’m holding your hand.” His reply was casual, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Anticipating her need for an explanation, he added, “I figured it was okay. Everything less than that is allowed once you’ve gone to a certain point with someone. Since we already kissed twice, holding hands seems a given.”

Despite the knots of anxiety tying her stomach into pretzel-like twists, Sarah discovered she couldn’t quite fight off the lure of Evan’s infectious confidence. His logic was faultless, and the thought occurred to her—That does make sense!—adding an almost humorous slant to her internal dilemma. As they meandered through the bustling food court, immersed in the vibrant chatter that encapsulated the university’s social scene, she felt her hand comfortably nestle into his.

The food court was a vibrant hub of activity. Students moved to and fro, their laughter and discussions creating an ambient hum that echoed around the vast space. The air was rich with the tantalizing scent of food from different cultures, and the murals that adorned the walls injected a youthful energy into the surroundings. Amid the chaos and noise, Sarah and Evan stood out, their hands interlocked in a silent promise of an unforeseen journey.

But with every passing minute, Sarah’s unease grew. Everywhere they went, students gave Evan friendly nods, simple smiles, or a casual wave of the wrist. The knowing looks and insinuating whispers from the predominantly female crowd were disconcerting. She wondered if she’d become an intruder in his world. She began to question why he had chosen her of all people.

Prompted by Evan, they found themselves seated at a table, the noise and activity of the food court reduced to a dull hum in the background. Evan returned shortly with bottles of water and fruit cups, a simple and light snack as per Sarah’s request.

The exchange began with the basics: their names and simple introductions. But when Evan asked her to share something more about herself, a wave of awkwardness washed over Sarah. She was so accustomed to the structure of professional-like interactions, the conversational ebb and flow of academic dialogues, that this request for personal detail felt foreign, disarming.

Unconsciously, she slipped into autopilot mode. The socially naive part of her receded, replaced by the poised, articulate woman who had faced countless academic panels and summer internship interviews. With the clinical precision of a resume, she began to list her accomplishments, her words spilling out in an educated, polished tumble of phrases that felt jarringly out of place in the casual environment.

Across the table, Evan watched her, his eyes sparkling with a quiet warmth. He saw her struggle, her resort to what was comfortable and familiar. Instead of interrupting or correcting her, he chose to sit back, a gentle smile playing on his lips. He was attentive, listening to each word with interest, and his expression was one of sheer fascination. There was an undeniable charm in her earnest recital, in the passionate way she recounted her academic accomplishments, in her slight discomfort navigating the unfamiliar waters of personal conversation. In the subtle crinkle of his eyes, the softening of his gaze, anyone looking would see the deepening of Evan’s affection for Sarah, an adoration unphased by her unconventional response.

The silence that hung between them after Sarah finished speaking was palpable, carrying the weight of her misstep. But within Evan’s patient gaze, there was no judgment—only an eagerness to know more, to delve deeper into the complex enigma that was Sarah.

As the minutes passed, Sarah could feel the weight of awkwardness settle over them. The thrill of their earlier encounter was rapidly giving way to her self-doubt and anxiety. Overwhelmed, Sarah fled the food court, her flight triggered by her own insecurities, fear, and uncertainty.

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**Scene #13: Sarah Relents and agrees to a date**

Sarah’s feet were brisk against the sidewalk, the rhythm of her steps resonating with the morning’s hurried energy. Yet, her speed wasn’t enough. She heard Evan’s voice calling out behind her, his tone playfully admonishing, “Hey, Cinderella, wait up!”

She halted in her tracks, her heart thrumming in her chest. Turning back, she faced him, a bewildered expression etched on her face. “Why do you call me Cinderella?”

Evan’s easy smile danced in the sunlight, as though he were a character plucked straight from a charming romance novel. His eyes, bright with humor, crinkled at the corners. “Because you’re always running away from me like it’s midnight.”

“And why are you so adamant about chasing after me?” She countered, a defiant edge lacing her words. “It’s clear there are plenty of adoring females that would welcome your attention.”

Caught in the gravity of his gaze, Sarah noted the determination etched in his features. “I want to learn more about you,” Evan stated simply, standing tall in his conviction. “What’s wrong with that?”

Sarah huffed, her chest rising and falling with the rhythm of her disbelief. “It doesn’t take a genius to see that we exist in different worlds.”

His laughter, unexpected and genuine, echoed around them. “Let me guess. You’re a genius?”

“That’s not my point.”

The tranquility of Evan’s demeanor was compelling. His gaze was patient and unwavering as he prompted, “Then what is your point?”

“As a couple, we make little sense. I came to college to get an education and network with professionals to further my academic and professional careers. I committed to focusing on my work and refraining from distracting relationships. You don’t need me. You must know every female on campus.”

Evan smiled, his grin a heartrending blend of sincerity and charm. “Are you jealous? You have nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not jealous. I simply can’t understand why you’re focusing your attention on me,” Sarah replied, her arms crossed over her chest, a physical barrier to the emotions threatening to spill over. Her eyes, brimming with questions, searched his.

Evan looked at her, his gaze reflecting a mix of curiosity and genuine interest. “Maybe the universe meant for us to meet! I don’t know, Sarah. There’s just something about you. You’re different from the girls I’m used to meeting.”

“You don’t even know me,” she countered, her voice softer than intended, her gaze shifting to the ground, avoiding his penetrating stare.

He nodded, acknowledging her point. “That’s true,” he admitted, a breeze lifting a lock of his hair as he met her gaze again. “But let me ask you something. Why did you kiss me? Why are you here with me now instead of studying?”

Her response was a mere whisper, lost amidst the symphony of the campus sounds around them. She shifted on her feet, her foot tracing an absent pattern on the pavement. “Other than the obvious…” she began, implying Evan’s good looks. Her voice tapered off to a whisper, “I don’t know either.”

A persuasive plea was etched in Evan’s eyes as he stepped closer to her, the distance between them shrinking to a mere breath. “Well, let’s find out together,” he said earnestly, his voice barely above a whisper. “Go to dinner with me.”

Silence enveloped them, the sounds of the bustling campus fading into a distant hum. Evan waited for her answer, each second stretching into an eternity. Finally, when the silence had stretched too long, Evan added, “College is about relationships, having fun, trying new things.”

Sarah resisted, but the inner argument she was having with herself was evident in the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. “I made a plan that makes sense, and I’ve held to it for three years.”

“Doesn’t it make sense to enjoy your college life? To be well-rounded? To pursue new relationships?” Evan countered.

Sarah was exasperated. She wasn’t used to someone challenging her perspective so effectively. “You’ve got my head spinning. It doesn’t help that every time you kiss me, my IQ drops 50 points. How can my plan make so much sense, yet your opposite approach makes sense too?”

His next words caught her off guard. “How can a piece of paper be both thin and wide?”

Before she could formulate an answer, Evan leaned in to kiss her again. The taste of his kiss was sweet and confusing, a turmoil of emotions, leaving her breathless. Pulling back, Evan proposed again. “Thursday night, dinner at seven at the Thai Garden?”

After a moment of hesitance, she relented. “Alright, I’ll meet you there at seven.”

Evan’s joy was infectious as he clapped his hands together. “That’s awesome! Can I get your phone number? Your last name?”

“Let’s wait and see how it goes,” Sarah replied cautiously.

He nodded, accepting her boundaries. As she turned to leave, he extended his hand. “May I walk you to your car?”

The walk was silent, their hands intertwined, a silent promise of what was to come. When they reached her car, Evan leaned in, hopeful. “May I get a kiss goodbye?”

“Of course.” She answered, her breath steadier now.

The kiss was long and tender, filled with promises of the potential for something more. Pulling away, Evan teased, “How’s that IQ doing?”

Sarah responded with an unusual attempt at humor. “2+2 equals 10.”

Laughter filled the air, a comforting and intimate sound. When it finally faded, Evan’s eyes held a hint of concern. “I’m afraid to let you go. I’m worried you won’t show up on Thursday.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there. I never break an appointment unless it’s an emergency.” Sarah’s voice was steady, and Evan could see the resolve in her eyes, a promise of the adventure to come.

# Chapter 3: Evan Has a Necklace Made

**Scene #14: Gudio Hears the Big News**

Evan’s foot tapped impatiently against the floor as he glanced at the clock. They were late for work, and Guido was taking forever in the bathroom, primping and preening as if it were a special occasion. Evan’s anxiety level was ratcheting up; he needed to be at the gym by six o’clock for a client session, and time was slipping away. But more than that, he was desperate to share his news with Guido, his best friend.

“Come on, Guido!” Evan called out, knowing that his plea would probably go ignored. Guido’s fixation with his appearance was well-known, especially now that there was a new female personal trainer at the gym he wanted to impress.

Finally, Guido emerged from the bathroom, every strand of his hair gelled perfectly into place. “Relax, bro,” he said, a grin spreading across his face. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“You’ve got plenty of time,” Evan corrected, grabbing his keys. “I’ve got a client session at six, and I need to talk to you about Sarah.”

Guido’s eyes widened. “Sarah? What’s the big news, bro?”

“Not here,” Evan said, urging Guido towards the door. “In the car.”

Guido’s old Honda Civic roared to life, and as they pulled out of the apartment complex, Evan began to relive his experience with Sarah, detailing every moment of their time together. Guido listened, a bemused expression on his face, concern growing as he realized how infatuated Evan was with this girl.

“Dude, you’re obsessed,” Guido finally interrupted. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

Evan’s face flushed. “I need your help, Guido. How can I make the date special? What should I get her?”

Guido looked at Evan like he’d lost his mind. “How would I know what’s special? Special to me is spending the night.” He rattled off a list of common gifts: candy, flowers, wine, and lingerie.

Evan shot down each suggestion, claiming they were either cliché or inappropriate for a first date. Guido’s patience wore thin, irritation creeping into his voice. “I don’t know, dude, you’re asking the wrong guy. Get your act together, or she’s gonna ditch you ten minutes into the date. You better play cool like ‘The Guido.’”

Evan’s face fell, but he knew Guido had a point. He was acting overly enthusiastic, and he needed to reel it in.

“Look, bro,” Guido continued, his voice softening. “I’m glad you got a date with this girl. But rumor is, she’s high-class. You better get your act together before Thursday.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Evan asked, genuinely curious.

“She wants a cool, sophisticated dude. If you want to get her something special, think Gucci purse, expensive shoes, jewelry–”

“That’s it! You’re a genius, dude,” Evan interrupted, his face lighting up with inspiration.

Guido grinned, pleased with himself. “What are you gonna get her?”

They pulled into the gym parking lot, and as they headed toward the entrance, Evan replied, “I’m not sure. I’ll go to the mall tomorrow and look for inspiration.”

The two friends entered the gym, Guido’s flashy appearance drawing rolled-eyes, and Evan’s mind abuzz with possibilities.

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**Scene #15: Evan Has a Special Gift Made**

Evan’s heart raced as he wandered through the maze-like corridors of the local mall, peering into one jewelry store after another. The reflection of glimmering gold and sparkling diamonds beckoned him from every window, but nothing seemed right. He wanted something unique, something special, something that would embody his feelings for Sarah.

After hours of searching without luck, frustration gnawing at him, Evan stumbled upon a small privately-owned jewelry store tucked away in a hidden corner. His eyes were immediately drawn to a display case filled with delicate glass slippers, each one only a few inches long. They were interesting and unlike anything he’d ever seen.

A surge of inspiration washed over him. He always called Sarah “Cinderella.” Was this a sign? Evan’s steps quickened as he entered the store, captivated by the possibility.

The jewelry store owner, a gentle-looking older man, greeted Evan and explained the significance of the glass slippers. They were merely ornamental, but Evan’s mind was already racing. He imagined a necklace, something symbolic, something that would connect to the way Sarah had left her glasses behind.

Evan’s eyes scanned the necklaces on display, an idea forming. What if he could find a necklace with tiny little glasses as the charm? That would be perfect, unique, and meaningful.

The owner, noticing Evan’s interest, offered assistance, but the store had nothing like what Evan envisioned. Undeterred, Evan thanked the man and continued his search, scouring every store in the mall with growing desperation and disappointment.

Just when he was about to give up, Evan spotted something extraordinary in the window of a vintage toy store—an old-fashioned doll wearing tiny little glasses. Excitement bubbled up within him, and he sprinted to the store, purchasing the doll without hesitation.

With renewed vigor, he returned to the small jewelry store, breathless and grinning, explaining his idea to the owner. He wanted to attach the doll’s glasses to a silver necklace, a custom piece unlike anything else.

“I found something that might work! Can you help me attach these glasses to a silver necklace?” Evan asked, his voice trembling with excitement.

The owner examined the glasses, then looked at Evan. “I can do it, but it won’t last long. It might break in the first week.”

Evan’s face fell, but the owner quickly continued, “However, we could coat them in sterling silver and attach small eyehooks. That would make it last.”

Evan’s eyes lit up. “Can you have it done by Thursday morning?”

The owner smiled, touched by Evan’s passion. “Normally, I require two weeks for custom work, but for young love... Come back tomorrow, half an hour before closing. It’ll be ready.”

Evan’s anxiety about the cost vanished when the owner quoted a price well within his budget. The relief and joy were palpable as he left the store, clutching the receipt in his hand.

Evan practically floated out of the mall, his heart light and his mind filled with anticipation. He had found the perfect gift, something special, something uniquely theirs. He knew, deep in his soul, that Sarah would be pleasantly surprised, and he couldn’t wait to see the look in her eyes.

# Chapter 4: Sarah Prepares for First Date

**Scene #16: Sarah Asks Katie For Help**

Sarah watched as her Business-101 students hunched over their exams, the silence of concentration heavy in the room. Her gaze landed on Katie Andrews, a freshman with a zest for life as vibrant as her pink-dyed hair. Scribbling on a folded piece of paper, Sarah placed it on Katie’s desk. The note held a simple request, Can you meet me after class?

Katie was one of Sarah’s brightest students - effervescent and friendly, with an infectious grin. When the last student had packed up and exited the large classroom, Katie made her way up to Sarah’s desk.

“Hi, Ms. Wilkins. What’s up?” Katie asked, her brown eyes twinkling with curiosity.

Sarah took a deep breath and launched into the question that had been on her mind. “Thank you for meeting with me. I’ve always admired your style, even though it’s different from my own. I have a first date tonight and want to look appropriate for the evening. I haven’t been on a date in a while, and I’m unsure what to wear.”

Katie’s face lit up, “I’d love to help!” she said, brimming with enthusiasm. “Are we talking wardrobe only or full makeover?”

Sarah pondered for a moment. “Whatever you think is best.”

“Really! Oh my gosh, Ms. Wilkins, I would love to do a full makeover! The other girls are going to be so jealous.”

Sarah tilted her head, puzzled. “Why?”

Katie grinned, revealing the unspoken fantasies of their class. “In this class, it’s every girl’s fantasy to do a makeover on you, and it’s every boy’s fantasy that by day you are this librarian-like professor, but at night you’re a sexy vixen.” She laughed and then added hurriedly, “Oh no, I hope that didn’t sound offensive.”

Shaking her head, Sarah let out a chuckle. “I’m not offended; I understand.” She could appreciate the humor and mild absurdity in Katie’s words. “What time is your date?”

“It’s at 7 PM at the Thai Garden Restaurant.”

Katie clapped her hands in excitement. “I heard that place has great food! Do you live off-campus?”

“Yes, I have an apartment about 10 minutes away.”

Katie’s smile faltered a bit. “I don’t have a car. Can you pick me up by the freshman dorms in about an hour?”

“I’ll be there,” confirmed Sarah, passing Katie a business card with her cell phone number.

“Great! I can’t wait.” Katie’s grin returned full force, and she threw her arms around Sarah in a spontaneous hug. “If we are going to be friends, I’d like to call you by your first name. Would that be okay?”

Sarah couldn’t help but return the hug, the nerves of her impending date temporarily forgotten. “Of course, my name is Sarah.”

“Perfect, Sarah!” Katie’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. “Get ready, because we’re about to have a blast! It’s going to be epic!”

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**Scene #17: Katie Loves Sarah’s Apartment**

As they entered the upscale, modern apartment, Sarah and Katie naturally diverged. For Katie, unaccustomed to such luxury, the entire space was a marvel. She was entranced, her gaze traveling over the tastefully minimalist decor, pristine cleanliness, and the blend of modern furniture. The floor-to-ceiling windows framed a breathtaking view of an untouched nature preserve in central Illinois—an unexpected gem, offering a green oasis laced with a shimmering creek.

“Wow, Sarah, your place is amazing!” Katie marveled, her voice slightly echoing in the vast space. She found herself gravitating toward the panoramic view, her footfalls soft against the gleaming hardwood floor.

In response, Sarah, already heading toward the kitchen, dismissively gestured with her hand. “It’s just home,” she called back. “Make yourself comfortable, Katie. Want something to drink? Coffee? Water? Or maybe a glass of wine?”

Katie, still mesmerized by the vast preserve, turned at Sarah’s words. “Oh, I’d love some wine, but still a few years away,” she said with a smirk. “Better make it water.”

Sarah let out a chuckle, “Oh, I didn’t even think about that,” she admitted, her tone light and amused.

Katie said, “You must be rich!”

“I’m not, but my father is. He owns a large corporation and pays the bills.” Sarah explained as she finished pouring the drinks. She gestured to the plush seating area that faced the scenic outdoors. “Have a seat on the couch.”

Katie’s youthful energy was infectious, her eyes wide with awe and excitement. “Oh, my God! I love this place!” Her voice rang out with pure delight, echoing around the room before she took an arm’s open, playful back plunge onto the couch, her body sinking comfortably into its plush cushions. Her laughter filled the room, a joyful melody wrapped around them like a comforting blanket.

Holding a glass of chilled wine in one hand and a glass of water in the other, Sarah watched with a smile playing on her lips. She was amused by Katie’s genuine delight, the vibrancy in the younger woman’s eyes reflecting a life very different from her own.

Sarah gracefully handed Katie the glass of water, then nestled into the other end of the couch, curling her legs underneath her. She held her glass of wine comfortably as she faced Katie, their eyes meeting in a silent agreement to embark on a girlish chat.

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**Scene #18: Sarah and Katie Chat**

“Wow, this place is amazing! How many bedrooms are there?” The question resonated in the expansive space.

“Two.” Sarah’s response came as a quiet murmur.

“Is your roommate home?” Katie inquired, her visual exploration of the apartment ongoing.

Sarah negated with a shake of her head. “It’s just me. My father insisted I have an extra bedroom that I could use as an office. But I never use the guest room, I prefer to work at the dining room table where I can spread out, or in my bedroom before I go to sleep.”

The idea of privacy, the luxury of space, left Katie yearning. “I can’t even imagine what it’s like not to share a room. Living in a tiny dorm room with a chatty roommate, makes it impossible to study.”

An understanding hovered between them, thick and unspoken. As Katie’s gaze made another sweep across the grand expanse of the apartment, Sarah seized the moment. With the effusive warmth of a mother granting her child a long-cherished wish, she said, “You know, the guest room’s always open if you ever need a quiet study sanctuary!”

“Really! Thank you!” With those words, Katie lunged forward and gave Sarah a big hug. Sarah was taken by surprise, her glass of wine tilting precariously, the liquid inside nearly sloshing out onto her hand. But she quickly righted the glass and returned Katie’s embrace, welcoming the warmth of her gratitude.

As Katie was about to open her mouth to dive into another subject, the familiar buzz of her cell phone diverted her attention. She quickly glanced at the screen, her eyebrows arching slightly. “Oh, it’s Nicole, my hairstylist,” she explained. “She wants to confirm our appointment and she needs a picture of you to start making a plan for your makeover.”

Sarah blinked in surprise but then smiled in response. “Alright, let’s do it.”

Katie quickly captured a picture of Sarah, her fingers flying over the phone as she sent the image to Nicole. Within moments, Nicole responded with a flurry of excited emojis, already expressing her eagerness to work on Sarah’s transformation.

Katie asked, “So altogether, including new clothes and hairstylist, what kind of budget are we talking?”

“No budget constraints, you’re in charge!” Sarah said with a playful grin.

Katie’s eyes lit up at this and she squealed, clapping her hands in excitement. “Really? Oh, this is going to be so much fun!”

The energy in the room was effervescent, reflecting off Sarah as her own excitement began to bubble up. It was new, this anticipation of a date, of being made over, of possibly breaking her own rules, but it was an invigorating feeling that Sarah welcomed.

Katie, full of curiosity, veered the conversation towards Sarah’s dating past. “You said it had been a while since you dated?” She was already conjuring up different makeovers in her mind, ready to transform Sarah for her date.

Sarah admitted, a hint of wistfulness in her voice. ‘I haven’t dated since I was 16.’”

“16? Wowza!” Katie’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. But she wasn’t done probing, her next question laced with a touch of delicacy. “If you don’t mind me asking, are you a...” She paused, “virgin?”

“No, I’m not a virgin,” Sarah confessed, the hesitation barely noticeable. “I experimented for a short time in high school, but I didn’t see what was so great about it.”

Katie leaned in closer, her voice a comforting whisper. “It will be way different when you find the right guy.”

A mischievous twinkle lit up in Sarah’s eyes, an expression that silently echoed, “Maybe!?” This was a different Sarah, one who was open to the possibility of something more, something exciting, something like... Evan.

Seizing the moment, Katie ventured to ask, “Do you think the guy you’re meeting tonight–“

Sarah interrupted, “Evan.”

Katie continued, “Evan, may be the right guy?”

The response was immediate, Sarah’s smile reaching her eyes as she raised her eyebrows. “He’s the right guy if he makes love even half as good as he kisses!”

Their giggles echoed around the room, the atmosphere brimming with anticipation and the sheer joy of newfound possibilities. The girls were truly ready for a night that promised to be a roller coaster of emotions and revelations.

Katie’s head tilted slightly, a silent question in her eyes. The puzzle of how a date came to be from a runner’s flight was intriguing. Sarah’s words offered the missing piece; Evan had sought her out in the library, persistent and charming. Despite her best attempts to stay true to her policy, she found herself succumbing to the magnetic pull of Evan’s appeal.

A knowing smile danced on Katie’s lips as she watched Sarah’s face transform, a touch of red gracing her cheeks. It was evident; the rule, the policy Sarah had held on to so firmly, had been fractured. A spark of defiance lit up in her eyes, an implicit admission of breaking her no-dating policy.

Katie’s features softened into a warm, knowing smile. “So you decided to step beyond your no-dating policy?” Her tone carried no judgment; instead, it was rich with approval, almost as if she had been waiting for Sarah to allow herself this freedom.

Sarah shrugged, a hint of sheepishness creeping into her features. “I didn’t have a choice. Every time he kisses me, I can’t think straight. Since the moment I met him, I haven’t been able to study or focus on anything. All I think about is him. Maybe this date will help clear my mind.”

“Are you hoping this date will lead to something more?” Katie asked, her eyes glinting with mischief.

“I have thought a lot about that. If I could find a way to have a relationship with Evan without being distracted from my work, I would like that. The thought of having someone by my side when attending an event or someone to hang out with here at home, appeals to me. But, I have a feeling it’s not going to be that simple.”

Katie nodded, taking in Sarah’s words. “Well, if you ask me, I think you are doing the right thing. You can’t let your studies keep you from living your life. There is always a way to make things work. You just have to find your balance.”

Katie said, “We need to get going. Let’s get you changed into something more fun for our shopping trip. Can we look at your wardrobe? I want to see if there’s anything we can use for tonight.”

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**Scene #19: Wardrobe Check**

The anticipation in Sarah’s apartment was palpable. Cloud-filtered sunlight spilled through the windows, casting an encouraging glow on the room. With a swing of her arm, Sarah revealed the contents of her bedroom closet to Katie. It was an organized array, divided into clear categories: business attire, formal dresses, and a rather underpopulated section of casual clothes.

Katie’s eyes widened at the sight of the designer dresses hanging with an air of elegance. “Are these designer?” she gasped.

Sarah’s smile shone as bright as the affirmation she gave. “Yes, they are.”

Katie ran her fingers over the silky fabric of a deep-red gown. “They’re breathtaking. Do you wear these often?”

Sarah tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and nodded. “I do. My father sees value in contributing to the community, and it doubles as an effective networking strategy. It’s fulfilling work. Plus, it spruces up the resume. I manage events for several local nonprofits. I’m practically at a fundraiser or a business social every week.”

Katie’s eyebrows arched upwards, intrigued. “I had no idea you led such an interesting life. However, for tonight, these dresses are overkill. We’ll need to raid the mall for that perfect outfit. And, trust me, we’re not going shopping with you looking like you’re heading to a board meeting.” She tossed a pair of jeans and a top at Sarah, her laughter echoing through the room.

“You do have contact lenses, right?” Katie asked as Sarah caught the clothes.

Sarah nodded in affirmation. “Yes, I do.”

“Fantastic! Time to go! Change your clothes, put your contacts in, and let’s swap that bun for a ponytail,” Katie ordered, her voice bubbling with excitement.

“Yes, Sir Sergeant,” Sarah saluted, mock seriousness on her face.

“You said I was in charge,” Katie shot back, pretending to pout.

“That I did,” Sarah replied, and they both burst into laughter, the joyous sound filling the room.

Katie paused, her energy momentarily reined in. “You have a Facebook account, right? I want to look at your photos. It will give me an idea of how you look in different dresses and colors. We’re working against the clock, so the more I know now, the better.”

Sarah, slightly taken aback by Katie’s frenzy, acquiesced. “Yes, I do.”

“If there’s nothing my eyes shouldn’t see, can I log in while you get ready?” Katie asked, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Sarah laughed. “Your eyes are safe. I mostly use Facebook for business contacts, academic pursuits , and my nonprofit work.”

Sarah gestured towards her laptop resting on the table. “Sure. It should auto-log you in.”

With Sarah’s approval, Katie darted to the dining room. Sarah was left to her transformation, as she replaced her glasses with contacts, her skirt suit with jeans, and a casual top. When she finally stepped out, her hair swishing in a loose ponytail, she was a whole new person.

Katie, absorbed in Sarah’s Facebook profile, glanced up and gasped. “Sarah! What a transformation. You look hot!”

Flattered, Sarah blushed, thanking Katie softly. Her confidence bloomed under the unexpected praise.

“But we’re just getting started, Sarah. We are going to make you look hotter than hot! Evan won’t know what hit him.” Katie’s words sparked an impish grin on Sarah’s face.

“That works for me. Let’s get this party started,” Sarah replied, her voice tinged with excitement. It was far from her normal behavior, but she was embracing the moment, just as she had when she first kissed Evan.

The anticipation of their shopping spree makeover hung in the air, wrapping around them like an electric current, stirring broad, excited smiles onto their faces.

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**Scene #20: Sarah’s Makeover**

Tucked away in the heart of vibrant central Illinois lay Shear Elegance Hair Salon, an unassuming, yet undeniably modern hair salon. Through the large glass façade, the salon’s chic and bustling atmosphere beckoned to both casual passersby and dedicated customers alike. The partly cloudy and pleasant weather outside contrasted with the salon’s warm interior, filled with the gentle hum of hairdryers, the soft rustle of foil, and the low murmur of friendly conversation.

Katie’s hairstylist, Nicole Jenkins, was finishing up with a client when Katie and Sarah arrived at her salon. “Have a seat. I’ll be with you in a second,” she called, flashing a welcoming smile. Her station, the third from the entrance, provided a perfect line of sight to Katie, who sat on the elegant, tufted couch.

Soon, Nicole finished with the client, cleaned up, and called for Katie and Sarah to come to her station. Her eyes widened as she took in Sarah’s appearance. “Is this the same girl in the picture you sent?” she asked Katie, her voice laced with surprise.

“Amazing what a pair of jeans and some contact lenses can do,” Katie chuckled. “Nicole, this is my dear friend, Sarah. Sarah, this is my friend and stylist, Nicole.”

They greeted each other with a warm handshake.

Nicole’s eyes studied Sarah’s features as she guided her to the swivel chair upholstered in rich, black leather. The salon’s contemporary aesthetic and the wooden floor’s natural finishes created a backdrop that emphasized Nicole’s professionalism. “Have a seat, Sarah. What are we doing today?” Nicole asked, her voice filled with anticipation.

“The works!” Katie exclaimed, her face lighting up.

Nicole took a minute or two before speaking, her eyes still fixed on Sarah. “This is unusual for me. On my website, I have before and after pictures of my makeovers. You already look like an ‘after’ girl. What do you think, Katie?”

“She is stunning, but I think we need to change things up. Are you okay with that, Sarah?” Katie asked, her tone both excited and reassuring.

“Whatever you both decide is fine with me, as long as my hair will still be appropriate for professional occasions,” Sarah replied, her voice firm yet trusting.

“Here’s what I think we should do. As pretty as you are, you’re one shade of light color—fair skin, blonde hair, etc. I say let’s add some low lights. Also, we’ll straighten your hair and cut a few inches off the bottom. Not only will you look super-hot for your date tonight, but it will look great for any professional engagement! How does that sound?” Nicole asked, her eyes sparkling with ideas.

“That sounds great!” Katie chimed in; her excitement was palpable.

“Works for me!” Sarah agreed, her willingness to embrace change reflecting a newfound excitement.

They settled into a comfortable rhythm as Nicole worked her magic. Katie played games on her phone while Nicole placed the low lights in Sarah’s hair, then moved on to her mani-pedi. The conversation flowed naturally, with the women’s voices weaving together in the open space of the salon.

“Tell me about this guy you’re dating tonight,” Nicole asked, her voice curious.

“I know little about him. All I know is his name is Evan,” Sarah replied, her voice tinged with intrigue.

“I’m sure I can dig up some information on him. Is he a student? A senior?” Katie asked, her fingers already typing on her phone.

“I’m not sure, but he seemed to know everybody. I would guess he is a senior or at least an upperclassman,” Sarah said, her curiosity growing.

“Hmm, I think that’s enough information. There can’t be that many Evans. Let me text my roommate’s sister. She’s a senior and knows a lot of people. In the meantime, I’ll Google him and see what I find,” Katie said, her voice filled with determination.

Nicole asked, “Where is your date tonight?”

“He’s taking her to that nice Thai place on Kirby Avenue! She could use some dating tips; this is her first date since high school,” Katie answered for Sarah.

Nicole raised an eyebrow, “Since high school!? That’s surprising.”

She paused, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered her next words carefully. Memories of past dates and relationships seemed to flit across her face. Finally, she nodded to herself and continued, “I’ve dated my fair share of men. My best advice for you would be to be yourself tonight. Don’t pretend to be something you’re not. That never works out. Are you nervous?”

Sarah felt a twinge of confusion, her head tilting slightly. “I’m more confused and disoriented than nervous. I’m used to dealing with situations analytically, not emotionally.”

Katie laughed, “Analytical or not, Sarah, you’re still a woman. I saw how your face lit up when you told me about how he kissed you. Where is the analysis in that?”

“You have a point there,” Sarah conceded, shifting uncomfortably in her seat as she considered the words. “I guess I embraced the feeling, but I can’t live in that place forever. I need to find some resolution tonight, so I can get back to focusing on my real life.”

Nicole frowned, her eyebrows drawing together in concern. “Resolution?”

“I like the idea of having a boyfriend, but I need to make sure the relationship doesn’t distract me from my goals,” Sarah explained, her hands nervously playing with the edge of the salon cape.

Nicole’s eyes widened, her mouth slightly agape. “A relationship? Don’t you think it might be too soon to talk about that? It might scare him away.”

“I think I might’ve found him!” Katie interjected, her face lighting up as she held up her phone. “Do you know if he works as a personal trainer?”

“Could be. He’s got the body for it,” Sarah replied, a slight blush coloring her cheeks.

Katie then opened the website for a local fitness center and navigated to the personal trainer section, showing Evan’s picture to Sarah. “Wow! Is this him?”

“Yep, that’s him!” Sarah said, pride in her voice, her chest puffing out slightly. Katie showed the picture to Nicole.

“He is hot!” Nicole exclaimed, leaning forward to get a closer look.

Katie grinned, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “His full name is Evan Vaughn. Let me text my roommate’s sister his name, and let’s see what we can find out!”

A few minutes later, the texts started rolling in. Katie looked up, her expression curious. “Were you walking around campus holding his hand the other day?”

“Yes, and it was horrible; everybody was staring at us like we committed some kind of crime or something,” Sarah recalled, her face crinkling in distaste.

Katie let out a long, loud laugh as she sent a text, her body shaking with amusement. “You’re the mystery woman!”

“Mystery woman?” Sarah repeated, perplexed, her head tilting to one side.

Katie continued to crack up laughing as she spoke, “The reason everyone was staring at you two was that they thought Evan was dating a professor. It was scandalous!”

Nicole joined in the laughing fest, but Sarah was not amused; her lips pursed tightly. “I don’t know why people can’t mind their own business.”

The conversation was quiet for a few moments while Katie read through her texts, the room filled with the soft sound of her thumb scrolling. Then she said, “If it’s any consolation, girl, you hit the jackpot! My friend says this guy is highly coveted. Let me see if I can get some more details.”

Katie read through her texts and said, “Here’s the scoop. The consensus is that he is a great guy, but you should avoid his best friend, Guido. Evan has had a few girlfriends since he has been here but doesn’t seem to be looking for anything serious. Does that bother you?”

“That’s perfect for me. The last thing I need is a serious relationship. A companion for a while, or maybe for the school year, has appeal. Anything more might derail me,” Sarah responded.

A couple of hours later, the makeover was complete. Nicole turned the chair around so Sarah could look into the mirror and stated, “My work here is done!”

“Sarah, you look incredible– hotter than hot! Like I knew you would! No one is going to mistake you for a professor tonight. I can’t wait to go shopping for a new outfit to match your new look,” Katie cheered.

Sarah stared at herself for a few minutes in the mirror, disbelief etched in her wide eyes. Nicole asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty, “Do you not like it?”

“It’s incredible. This situation is all overwhelming and surreal. I think it’s just now registering that I’m about to go on a date with a guy I hardly know and break my number one rule,” Sarah admitted, her voice full of mixed emotions, her hands trembling slightly.

Nicole attempted to comfort Sarah, and Katie chimed in, “Try not to make such a big deal about it. It is just a first date. Use this as an opportunity to get to know him better and see where it goes.”

Sarah looked at Katie, “Katie, would you mind staying in my apartment while I’m on my date? If you like, we can stop by your dorm so you can grab clothes and study materials and stay the night. I might need a friend before the night is over.”

Katie hugged Sarah warmly, her eyes filled with understanding and support. “Of course, I’ll be there for you.”

# Chapter 5: Sarah and Evan’s First Date

**Scene #21: Sarah & Evan’s First Date**

The Thai Garden Restaurant was a hidden gem, tucked away in a bustling part of town. As Sarah stood outside, she could see the glow of warm lanterns hanging from the ceiling and intricately carved wooden panels adorning the walls. Tables adorned with colorful silk tablecloths were spaced generously to create a sense of intimacy. Faint strains of traditional Thai music whispered through the air, mingling with the fragrant aroma of spices and herbs. A tasteful fountain at the center of the dining area added a gentle murmur, completing a sensory experience that promised a cozy, romantic atmosphere.

Through the window, she could see Evan texting on his phone, a sight that brought a flurry of emotions to her heart. Terrified, she thought, feeling a sudden incapability to maintain her no-dating rule. But Sarah was never truly out of control; even at this moment, she had a well-thought-out plan.

Her new dress ensemble, chosen with Katie’s help, clung to her figure. It was an elegant blend of confidence and allure, something she hoped would strike the right note.

Evan waited anxiously, trying to find someone to text to help pass the time. He felt a presence over his shoulder and looked up, then back to his phone. A second later, he looked back again, his heart leaping as he realized it was Sarah. Seeing her brought a genuine smile to his face. Evan stood up and kissed Sarah, his lips gentle on her cheek.

“I almost didn’t recognize you. Did you do all this for me?” he asked, referring to her makeover.

“I was in the mood to change things up a bit,” Sarah replied, her eyes moving up and to the right, her lips curling into a sly grin.

“Looking for a change, are you? I hope that bodes well for me.” Evan laughed, his eyes twinkling.

“We’ll see,” she said, a hint of mystery in her voice.

“Let’s go eat!” Evan said, leading her to the table.

When they got to the table, Evan pulled out the seat for Sarah, his movements graceful and practiced. “Thank you. You are quite the gentleman,” she said, her voice soft.

“You look great! But you know you didn’t have to change anything for me. You are beautiful now; you’re as beautiful as when I first laid eyes on you,” Evan said, his voice sincere.

Their server appeared as Evan finished his compliment, ready to take their orders. After two classes of Pinot Noir were ordered and delivered, Evan went with the Spicy Pad Thai, and Sarah settled on the Som Tam.

“I was worried you wouldn’t show up,” Evan said, his eyes searching hers.

“I told you I always keep my appointments,” she replied, catching herself. “Sorry, poor choice of words. Why don’t we start this date off with you telling me a little about yourself?”

Evan arched an eyebrow playfully. “Now, are you looking for my full résumé, complete with professional references, or just a summary of my many academic achievements?”

Sarah’s eyes sparkled as she caught the joke. Even though it was a playful jab at her, she found it endearing. His sense of humor put her at ease.

Sarah burst into laughter, shaking her head. “Ha ha, you’re so funny! I promise, no more résumé recitations. Let’s stick to the topics normally discussed on a first date.”

Evan raised his glass, his eyes sparkling. “Deal,” he said, his voice tinged with genuine enthusiasm. “Let’s make this a night to remember.”

Sarah’s heart gave a little leap, and a warm, pleasurable sensation spread through her. She was beginning to feel truly comfortable with him, and the night seemed full of promise. With a smile, she reached out and clinked her glass to his, toasting to the sentiment.

“Well, I’m a pretty simple guy,” Evan began, leaning back in his chair and casting a casual glance around the room. “I work as a personal trainer at the gym down the street. I like to play sports, hike, run, bike, anything that gets me outside. I enjoy hanging out with my friends. Anything else you want to know?”

His words painted a picture of an active and outgoing person who thrived on physical activities and enjoyed the company of others. Sarah’s eyes were fixed on Evan, and she was keen to learn more.

“What’s your major? Are you a good student?” she asked, genuinely interested in understanding what motivated him academically.

Evan’s face turned slightly thoughtful. “I’m majoring in software development. I guess I’m a good student when I apply myself. At least, that’s what my sister would say. I promised her I would maintain at least a 3.0 GPA. I’m hovering around that level now.”

Sarah noted the reference to his sister, intrigued by how Evan’s expression softened at the mention of her. “Are you close to your sister?”

Evan leaned back in his chair, his eyes momentarily distant as he considered the question. “Yes, but she’s in Chicago right now, so I don’t see her as often as I’d like. That’s where I’m from. How about you? What’s your story? Where are you from?”

“I grew up in Seattle, no siblings. I’m a business major focusing on international trade, a teacher’s assistant, and I’m in the running for graduating at the top of our class,” Sarah replied, her voice steady and confident.

The conversation flowed naturally, each question opening up new avenues for exploration. Evan’s curiosity was piqued, and he asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, I get the impression that you could’ve gone to any university you wanted to. Why would you pick the University of Illinois?”

“My father owns a large corporation. He was a self-made man from modest beginnings. He went to U of I, and our agreement was I would follow in his footsteps and get my Bachelor’s degree here. After graduation, I plan to attend an Ivy League college for my master’s degree.”

Evan’s eyes sparkled with interest as he leaned forward, “That’s very interesting. Do you have a job?”

As Sarah opened her mouth to reply, their food arrived, pausing the conversation. The server placed their plates on the table with a flourish, the aroma of the freshly cooked meals filling the air.

Sarah looked down at her plate, eyes widening. “This food looks and smells delicious!” She picked up her fork and took a bite, her face lighting up with delight. “It even tastes better than it looks. Excellent choice of restaurants!”

Evan grinned, pride in his selection evident. “I don’t get to come here very often, but I love their food,” he said as he ate his meal, savoring the flavors.

Unperturbed by the interruption, Sarah continued their conversation, her voice filled with enthusiasm. “I don’t have a paying job, but I stay busy volunteering as an events coordinator for various nonprofit organizations in the area. During summer breaks, I intern for large corporations to gain experience.”

“I’m quite impressed!” Evan responded, his admiration genuine. “I like the idea of getting involved with non-profit organizations. It just seems like you should allow some time for fun.”

Sarah grinned and reminded Evan, her eyes twinkling, “I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are! I’m happy about that,” Evan chuckled, raising his glass to toast their enjoyable evening.

They continued to eat, their conversation flowing effortlessly, the connection between them growing stronger with each passing moment. The laughter, the shared stories, and the pleasure in each other’s company marked the date as something special, a chance encounter that held the promise of something more.

Sarah ordered a small espresso for dessert, while Evan chose a piece of strawberry cheesecake. The conversation continued with an air of intimacy, though the ambiance of the restaurant faded into the background as they focused on each other.

Sarah glanced down at her cup, then back at Evan. “I was wondering if I could make a proposal?”

Evan raised an eyebrow, a grin playing on his lips. “A proposal already? We just met,” he joked, then leaned forward, his eyes locking onto hers. “Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Sarah’s expression became thoughtful as she formulated her words. “Since I met you, I have been reconsidering my thoughts on relationships. A relationship is a partnership. I wanted to propose that we form a partnership. In business, it is essential to identify all foreseeable issues before signing an agreement.”

Evan’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, his head tilting to one side. “Interesting analogy. Go on, I’m listening.”

With a steadying breath, Sarah continued. “My father taught me it is best to lead with what I have to offer first, and here is what I can provide to this partnership. I can teach you some study techniques to improve your grades with minimal effort. I can already tell you’re going to want me to break out of my shell and socialize with your friends and others in my age group. I can’t promise I’ll attend every party or social event, but I’ll accompany you as often as possible, and if there is a particular event that is important to you, I’ll try to attend.”

Evan interrupted, putting down his fork. “May I ask a question?” Sarah nodded, and Evan continued, “I play softball every Sunday morning. Will you be able to come to my games?”

“My schedule is usually clear on Sunday mornings. I should be able to make it to many of your games,” Sarah replied, a reassuring smile gracing her lips.

Having Sarah at his games was an important point for Evan, evidenced by the excited look on his face. “Continue with your proposal,” he urged, leaning back in his chair.

“As adults in a romantic relationship, I expect some physical intimacy will be involved. I want to be honest with you here. I’m not a virgin, but I’m also not very experienced. I haven’t been on a date since high school. You are quite attractive, and I’m interested in pursuing a physical relationship. I’ll need you to be patient as I explore that aspect of myself. I expect you to wait until I’m ready.”

Evan’s face softened, and he reached across the table, covering her hand with his, his expression earnest. “I appreciate your honesty, Sarah. Take all the time you need. I want this to be right for both of us.”

Sarah looked at Evan, her expression sincere. “The most important thing to me is that you understand my academic career comes first. That means no pressuring me to go to parties or spend time together until after I’ve attended to my studies. I attend a lot of formal events. Just as I’ll attend your social events, I expect the same in return. Keep in mind these aren’t frat parties.”

Evan’s eyebrows shot up, and he leaned back in his chair, slightly taken aback. “Is that what you think I am, a frat boy?”

Sarah quickly reached out, touching Evan’s hand. “I didn’t mean to imply that. I want to let you know you may have to dress up for some of these events. These events will also be a great way for you to make important business connections. Those connections may help you find a great job after graduation.”

The stern lines on Evan’s face relaxed, replaced by curiosity. “Is making connections why you want me to attend these events?”

“No, it’s not just that,” Sarah replied, her voice softening. “I like you. It would honor me to have you by my side at any event. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since the moment you kissed me. If we let our relationship develop organically, I may never regain my focus.”

Evan’s eyes sparkled with emotion, his words carrying a warmth that made Sarah’s heart skip a beat. “I feel the same. You’ve been the only thing on my mind for the last week. I can’t focus any better than you can. There’s something about you that is just so different and so special. It’s like, somehow, I already know it will work out. There’s nothing I want more than to call you my girlfriend.”

“That’s my proposal. Do you have a counter-proposal?” Sarah asked, looking expectantly at Evan.

Evan’s eyes twinkled, and a broad smile spread across his face. He had no problem with Sarah’s less-than-romantic offer and voiced his approval. “No counter-proposal. I’m in total agreement!”

Sarah laughed, a sound that was light and genuine. “My father said if they accept your first offer, you offered too much.”

“Look at it from my point of view,” Evan retorted, his voice filled with good-natured amusement. “You said you would attend my games, you plan to explore your sexuality with me when you’re ready, you are going to hook me up with potential employers, and you can help me get good grades, which will make my sister happy. What more could I ask for?”

With a confident smile, Sarah put out her hand for a handshake. “So we have a deal?”

Evan’s expression turned mischievous. “No way are we sealing this deal with a handshake.”

The implication of his words hung in the air, not so subtly hinting that it was time to leave the restaurant because he wanted to seal the deal with a kiss. A knowing smile danced in Sarah’s eyes, and she felt a pleasant thrill at the prospect. The way Evan looked at her was enough to tell her he felt the same way.

He called for the check, paid it, and then stood up, offering his hand to Sarah. As they walked toward the restaurant’s exit, their hands entwined, the air between them crackled with anticipation.

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**Scene #22: Evan Gives Sarah a Pendant**

The cool early fall night embraced them as they stepped out of the Thai Garden Restaurant, their hearts still fluttering from the enchanting evening they had shared. Hand in hand, Evan guided Sarah towards her car, the silent connection between them saying more than words ever could. Each step they took was filled with the lingering excitement of their first date, and neither of them felt the need to break the silence.

Once they reached Sarah’s car, she turned around and leaned against the driver’s side door, facing Evan. He looked into her eyes, the depths of his gaze reflecting the whirlwind of emotions he felt in that moment. The air was charged with an electrifying blend of desire and sentiment.

Evan leaned in, his lips finding hers in a kiss that was both familiar and new. The kiss started tenderly, an exploration of their feelings before it deepened into a passionate embrace. It was a moment of surrender, a release of the tension that had been building throughout the evening. The energy between them shifted dramatically, the formality of their earlier conversation giving way to the raw intensity of their emotions.

As their lips finally parted, Sarah looked into Evan’s eyes, her heart racing. She spoke, her voice a mixture of vulnerability and honesty. “I love the way I feel when you kiss me, but it scares me. You have this power over me. It’s intoxicating. I apologize for my business-like approach. I’ve never had a real romantic relationship before, and I’m struggling with the fear of losing control.”

Evan’s gaze held hers, his expression soft and understanding. “Never apologize for being who you are. You have the same power over me. It doesn’t scare me, though. It feels like I have been waiting for you. I’ve never felt this way about anybody before. I understand this is unfamiliar territory for you. I promise I won’t pressure you to do anything before you’re ready.”

A playful smile crossed Sarah’s lips. “I sense you won’t have to wait too long.”

Evan’s eyes lit up with hope. “I like the sound of that! I don’t suppose you have time to hang out more tonight?”

Sarah shook her head, a hint of regret in her expression. “Not tonight. My friend Katie is waiting for me back at my apartment. I will be there on Sunday to see your game.”

Seeing Sarah’s commitment to attending his game brought a genuine smile to Evan’s face. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Evan’s next words took Sarah by surprise as he pulled out a box from his pocket. Inside the box lay a delicate silver pendant attached to a silver chain. The pendant was a tiny set of eyeglasses, a symbol that held a deep significance for both of them.

“May I put this on you, my Cinderella?” Evan’s voice held a touch of playfulness, and Sarah turned around to allow him to fasten the necklace around her neck. As she turned back to face him, she held the pendant in her hand, examining it closely.

Evan could see the curiosity and confusion in Sarah’s eyes, prompting him to share the story behind the necklace. “You know how I call you my Cinderella because you’re always running away from me?”

Sarah nodded, her lips curling into a fond smile.

Evan continued, his voice gentle and sentimental. “I wanted to get you something for our date tonight, and I wanted it to be unique. While shopping, I ran across this glass case with a bunch of small Cinderella-type glass slippers and shoes. It turns out people collect these things. They gave me the idea of a necklace with an eyeglass pendant inspired by the glasses you left behind while making your escape.”

Sarah’s smile deepened, and she chuckled softly at Evan’s playful comment.

“I couldn’t find any necklaces like that,” Evan continued, his voice filled with warmth. “I shopped at all the jewelry stores I could find. But I couldn’t find anything that would work. I even tried the jewelry sections at the department stores, nothing. I was about to give up when I passed by this antique store. And what do you know, the universe plopped an antique doll with the perfect size glasses right in the window for me to see.”

Evan’s voice carried a mix of amazement and excitement as he recounted his journey to find the pendant. “I bought the doll and took the glasses to a jeweler to have the glasses attached to a chain. The jeweler suggested dipping it in silver so that it would last forever. Forever sounded good to me, so I had him do that. I meant it to commemorate our first kiss. Whenever you wear it, I want you to remember that magical moment.”

Tears welled up in Sarah’s eyes, her heart deeply touched by Evan’s thoughtful gesture. She looked at the pendant, now hanging around her neck, and felt a rush of emotions she hadn’t anticipated.

“Thank you, Evan,” she managed to say, her voice filled with genuine gratitude. “That’s so romantic and so sweet. I can’t believe I’m crying. I haven’t cried since I was a child.”

Evan pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her in a comforting hug. “Does that mean you like it?”

Sarah looked up at him, her eyes glistening with tears. “I love it! It’s the most wonderful, beautiful, stupendous gift I’ve ever received from anybody. I can’t believe I’m going to ask this, but if you kept the doll, may I have it?”

Evan chuckled softly, his fingers brushing away the tears that had escaped down her cheeks. “I will bring it on Sunday.”

Sarah’s smile was radiant as she expressed her gratitude once again. The desire to have the doll surprised even her, but in that moment, she knew it held a special place in her heart.

As the night drew to a close, Sarah’s sense of reluctance mingled with the excitement of what lay ahead. “I don’t want this night to end, but I need to get home. My friend is waiting, and I have an early class tomorrow.”

Evan nodded, his gaze holding hers. “No worries. Can I ask you for one more thing, maybe two?”

A playful glint danced in Sarah’s eyes. “You sure can.”

Evan’s voice was light, filled with a touch of humor. “Can I get your last name? Maybe a phone number or an email?” He smirked, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Sarah burst into laughter, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Of course, you can.” She handed him a business card, encouraging him to send his information to her.

Before they parted ways, they shared one more long, passionate kiss, a sweet promise of what was to come. As they finally pulled away, the echo of their shared emotions lingered in the cool night air, a silent promise of the journey their hearts were embarking upon.

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**Scene #23: Sarah Updates Katie**

Sarah entered her apartment and closed the door behind her, a mixture of emotions swirling within her like a storm. She leaned back against the door and released a long sigh, feeling as if she were floating on a cloud. The evening's events had left her vibrating with excitement, a sense of relief washing over her like a gentle wave. The experience had been nothing short of exhilarating, leaving her weightless in its wake.

Katie's voice cut through her thoughts, pulling her back to the present. "I am guessing by the look on your face that the date went well?" Her eyes sparkled with a mixture of hope and curiosity.

Sarah's lips curled into a radiant smile as she met Katie's gaze. "It was perfect."

Katie's own excitement was palpable as she jumped up and down, embracing Sarah in a tight hug. Her voice trembled with genuine happiness as she exclaimed, "I'm so happy for you, Sarah. Come sit down, let's talk."

Sarah followed Katie to the couch, settling in as she held out the pendant for her friend to see. "Evan calls me his Cinderella because I'm always trying to run away from him like it's midnight."

With a knowing smile, Sarah shared the story behind the necklace, the sentiment and thoughtfulness that Evan had poured into its creation. As she spoke, she felt a tear well up in her eye, the emotions of the moment overwhelming her once again.

Katie's voice was soft as she responded, her eyes shining with empathy and a touch of envy. "Oh, Sarah, that's so romantic. I swear you are the luckiest woman I know."

Sarah's heart swelled with joy, her fingers tracing the delicate pendant as she replied, "I feel like the luckiest woman alive."

A gentle buzz from her phone drew her attention to a Facebook message. She pulled it up to reveal a relationship request from Evan. A mix of nerves and excitement coursed through her as she showed it to Katie.

"Evan wants me to confirm that we're in a relationship," she explained.

Katie's question was straightforward, her curiosity evident, but her voice carried a note of seriousness. "Are you in a relationship?"

Sarah's smile spoke volumes as she nodded. "Yes."

Katie playfully raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in her eye. "Wow, you move fast! Are you going to confirm it?"

Sarah's response was filled with genuine enthusiasm. "I don't think I've ever wanted to do anything more in my life."

With a simple tap on the screen, she confirmed the relationship on Facebook, solidifying the connection she had already felt in her heart.

Katie's words were filled with warmth, her face reflecting the affection she felt for her friend as she watched her friend's radiant glow. "I can't wait for all the details. You are glowing!"

Sarah's laughter was like music, a reflection of the happiness bubbling within her. "I feel incredible, Katie! In a single day, I have an amazing new friend and an amazing new boyfriend. For the first time, I feel like a normal woman."

As she spoke, a surge of emotion coursed through her, and she couldn't help but thrust back against the cushion in sheer jubilation, her excitement practically tangible.

"Katie, I had no idea it would feel this good." Her heart soared as she basked in the glow of newfound emotions. Sarah thought, \_In the past, I might have scoffed at girls gushing over boys and talking endlessly about romantic feelings. But now, I finally understand. I know what it's like to be kissed romantically, to feel this rush of emotion and connection. And in this moment, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

In that moment, Sarah let go of her rational thoughts, surrendering to the overwhelming surge of feelings that enveloped her. She reveled in the sensation of being a "normal woman," embracing the intoxicating journey she had embarked upon with Evan.

# Chapter 6: Sarah Meets Evan's Friends

**Scene #24: Evan Gives Sarah the Vintage Doll**

A crisp, cool morning greeted central Illinois with a partly sunny sky, casting a gentle glow over the lush grassy regions and well-maintained softball fields. The freshness of early fall tingled in the air, mixing with the distant laughter of children and the muted thud of softballs hitting gloves. Leaves, touched with hints of amber, rustled softly as young love seemed to fill the atmosphere with a sweetness as vibrant as the season itself.

Evan stood in the parking lot, dressed in his softball uniform, spiked cleats tapping impatiently on the pavement. Though his glove was absent, his eyes were alight with anticipation, scanning the horizon for Sarah’s white Audi sedan.

Sarah, meanwhile, was an epitome of casual college charm, clad in an orange and blue University of Illinois sweatshirt, a cute knit hat, matching scarf, and five-finger mittens adorned in the same blue that represented her university. Her jeans were comfortably casual, her ankle-high black zippered boots everyday and affordable.

Evan’s heart leaped as Sarah’s car pulled into the lot. She was just as excited as he, her eyes sparkling as they locked onto his. They rushed to each `other, their greeting sealed with a passionate kiss before a word was spoken.

“I’ve got something for you!” Evan exclaimed, his voice tinged with boyish excitement.

“You do?” Sarah’s eyes widened, the anticipation bubbling within her.

With a flourish, Evan grabbed the vintage doll from his car and handed it to Sarah. The typically stoic Sarah transformed, giddy like a schoolgirl. Tears welled in her eyes as she recalled the sentimental nature of the gift, feeling the weight of the pendant tucked under her sweatshirt.

“Are you ready to meet my friends?” Evan asked, snapping her back to the moment.

“I’m nervous but as ready as I’ll ever be,” Sarah admitted, her voice trembling slightly. “I even went shopping with Katie yesterday to look the part,” she added, gesturing to her outfit.

Evan enveloped her in a reassuring hug, comforting her with his warmth. As they pulled apart, Sarah opened her car door, gently placing the doll inside and grabbing a book.

“Evan, do you mind if I read a book during your game?” she asked, a playful glint in her eye.

“Of course, I don’t mind. Our games can last as long as two hours, and I fully support and understand that your academics are your number one priority,” Evan replied warmly. “I’m nothing but grateful that you’re coming to my games.”

Sarah couldn’t help but laugh, her eyes dancing with amusement. “That’s good to know; maybe I’ll need to bring some study materials one day. But this book is not about academics.” She smiled widely and showed Evan the front of the book. Softball for Dummies.

The revelation caused a hearty laugh from both of them, the humor enhancing the sweetness of the moment.

“I don’t know anything about sports. If I’m going to come to your games, I want to understand the rules as best as I can,” Sarah explained.

“You are so adorable!” Evan exclaimed, his eyes twinkling.

Sarah felt a surge of endorphins at the compliment. No one had ever called her adorable before.

“The game is about to start. Let’s go,” Evan urged, but he sensed Sarah’s nervousness in her eyes and body language.

She looked at him, a touch of vulnerability in her gaze. “Can I have a kiss?” she asked, her voice soft.

Evan obliged, their lips meeting in a tender and uplifting kiss.

As they headed toward the bleachers, where Evan would introduce Sarah to his inner circle of friends, the connection between them felt more profound, more secure. The moment was sealed, a memory etched into their hearts, and the promise of young love blossoming.

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**Scene #25: Patti Learns Evan Has a New Girlfriend**

The cold aluminum bleachers under Patti’s thighs bit through her jeans, an icy reminder of the chill in her heart. She sat, a picture of outward calm, staring at the parking lot. Evan and Sarah were there, laughter bubbling between them, the new doll he’d given her catching the sunlight. Every kiss, every giggle, was a punch in Patti’s gut.

I thought I meant something to him, she reflected, her chest aching. How can he just move on so quickly?

Patti’s mind raced back to her time with Evan, those days filled with laughter, comfort, and a connection she had never felt before. But as the memories tumbled through her mind, a rational voice emerged, grounding her in the reality of what had been. He never lied to me. He never called me his girlfriend. We were good friends, even before... before everything changed.

She thought of the way he’d introduced her to his sister, the way he’d looked at her, and how those months had lasted twice as long as any other girl he’d been with. But she knew in her heart that she had no right to be angry. Evan had been clear about his feelings, about his unusual monogamous but casual relationships. He hadn’t deceived her; he’d been honest and caring. He always treated her well – as both a lover and a friend.

Her heart ached, but she reminded herself that Evan was still her good friend. She didn’t want to lose that friendship, even though it hurt to see him with Sarah. A small smile tugged at her lips as she acknowledged that she still cared for him deeply, not just as a lover but as a friend.

He’s not a bad guy, she reassured herself, her eyes on Evan in the parking lot. He just never felt about me the way I felt about him. And that’s okay. It has to be okay.

Roxanne, seated beside her, followed her gaze and scowled. “Look at that stuck-up snob,” she spat. “A rich bitch. I heard all about her.”

Patti’s eyes narrowed, but her voice was soft. “She’s very beautiful.”

“She doesn’t hold a candle to you. You’re twice as beautiful as her. Right, Guido?” Roxanne demanded, turning to where Guido was warming up.

Guido glanced at them, his face neutral. “I think they’re both smoking hot! But you know Evan. Beauty is not his priority. He’s all about ‘chemystery.’” His voice dripped with sarcasm as he threw the ball.

Roxanne’s face twisted with anger, her arms waving animatedly. “He should be with you, Patti. I know it, you know it, everyone knows it. Right, Guido?”

“I ain’t saying nothing. I want no part of all your drama stuff.” Guido’s voice was firm as he turned away, dismissing the subject.

Patti’s eyes were still on Evan and Sarah, a silent longing in her heart. Girlfriend? He never even called me his girlfriend.

“Look at her, trying to look like one of us. She’ll never be one of us. Look, she even bought a fucking book to read,” Roxanne sneered, her words coated with venom.

Patti couldn’t respond; her throat felt too tight. The reality of Evan’s new relationship was crashing down on her, and she felt lost, adrift.

“Shush! Here they come,” she finally whispered, forcing herself to sit up straighter as Evan and Sarah approached.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” Sarah’s voice was sweet, her smile genuine.

Evan stood back with Sarah, quickly introducing Patti, Roxanne, Guido, and a few other friends. There was no handshakes, no hugs, just a hurried introduction before the game’s call. Evan’s eyes met Patti’s for just a moment, but she looked away, the pain too fresh.

Conflicted between wanting to support Evan and welcome his new love into their inner circle, and feeling like a jilted ex-girlfriend, Patti forced a silent smile after the introduction.

Guido and Evan headed for the field, the call for the start of the game echoing across the park. The coldness of the bleachers seemed to seep into Patti’s soul, leaving her feeling numb and alone.

As the game started, all she could think about was Evan’s laughter, his joy with this new girl, and the word that kept echoing in her mind: Girlfriend?

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**Scene #26: The Enforcers Win!**

Patti settled in to watch the softball game. Her eyes immediately drifted to Sarah, who sat a few rows down, her head buried in a book. She is pretty, Patti admitted to herself. But why a book at a softball game? Why did Evan choose her? The thoughts stung as jealousy welled up within her.

Sarah looked up whenever Evan was up to bat, then returned to her book, Softball for Dummies. Her smile was genuine, her eyes filled with a keen desire to understand the game, to support Evan.

Roxanne, seated beside Patti, had already made up her mind about Sarah. Unable to see the book’s title from her vantage point, her face twisted in irritation, she whispered, “Can you fucking believe she’s reading a book at her boyfriend’s softball game?” emphasizing the word “boyfriend’s” with air quotes.

Patti’s lips pressed into a thin line. She wanted to share Roxanne’s disdain but couldn’t shake off her conflict. The morning air was crisp, but as the game progressed, the sun warmed the field, mirroring the increasing tension in Patti’s mind.

Patti stood up. “I’m headed to the concession stand. Can I grab anyone a beer or something to drink?”

Roxanne grumbled her order, and Patti turned to Sarah. Unaware of what a concession stand sells, Sarah asked if they served wine. Pattie replied, “I don’t think they have any wine. Would you like something else instead? My treat!”

Sarah looked up, appreciative. “No, thank you,” she replied, her voice soft.

Roxanne rolled her eyes and mumbled an insult, but Patti shot her a scolding look and silently mouthed, “Knock it off!”

The game was heating up, the score tied, Evan on third base, and Guido up to bat. The energy in the bleachers was palpable, and even Sarah was now fully vested in the game, her book forgotten. She pulled out the pendant Evan had made for her, rubbing it nervously. Patti noticed the unique design, sensing its significance.

Guido swung, connecting with a satisfying crack. The ball soared, and Evan sprinted home, scoring the winning run. The crowd erupted in cheers, Sarah jumping up and down, her face alight with excitement. Patti wanted to join in, but her enthusiasm was dampened, her eyes fixed on Sarah. Roxanne muttered something about Sarah being fake, but Patti barely heard her.

Evan and Guido dashed toward the bleachers, high-fiving teammates on the way. Evan made a beeline for Sarah, picking her up and spinning her around before planting a passionate kiss on her lips. To Patti, it felt like an uppercut to her chin.

Guido invited everyone to “Sluggers,” a sports bar and grille, for a post-game celebration. As Evan and Sarah headed to the car, Patti asked Guido about the pendant. His explanation, the story behind it, felt like a final knockout punch. She had never known Evan to be creative like that. She had never received any sentimental gifts when they were together.

Roxanne’s face turned red as she watched Evan and Sarah celebrate the victory. Unable to contain her anger, she turned to Guido, her voice laced with fury. “What the hell is wrong with Evan? He’s so insensitive, making out with his ‘girlfriend’ in front of Patti. It pisses me off!”

Quick to Evan’s defense. Guido, calm but firm, shook his head as he met Roxanne’s eyes. “He is not being insensitive. You know Evan. He’s just oblivious to this kind of thing. He doesn’t know he’s hurting anyone. We’re all his friends. He expects us to support his choices.”

“That’s bullshit, Guido!” Roxanne snapped, her arms crossed defiantly.

Silently observing the exchange, Patti finally spoke up, her voice softer but resolute. “It’s not bullshit. Technically, he and I were never a couple– just friends having fun. If I brought a boyfriend to the game, Evan would support me, no matter what he may or may not feel inside. ” Her eyes met Guido’s, a question in her gaze. “He’s in love with her, isn’t he?”

Guido held out his hands, palms facing upward, and his shoulders lifted in a careful, deliberate shrug. His expression was thoughtful, his eyes momentarily distant, as if he himself were searching for the answer to Patti’s question. He didn’t answer her question. He didn’t need to. His shrug said it all.

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**Scene #27: The Drive to the Post-Game Party**

Sarah and Evan climbed into her freshly waxed, pearl-white luxury sedan, still flush with excitement from the game. The exterior gleamed in the partly sunny weather, reflecting their victorious mood as they buckled in for the drive to Sluggers sports bar and grill.

“So, how was it, experiencing your first softball game?” Evan asked, his eyes twinkling with curiosity.

“It was fun! Especially at the end. I loved watching you score the winning run!” Sarah replied, her fingers finding Evan’s pendant around her neck.

Evan laughed affectionately, noticing her gesture. “So you enjoyed the game?”

“Honestly, I’ll probably never be a huge fan. But I enjoyed watching you play,” Sarah admitted, smiling at Evan.

Evan smiled. “I can live with that.”

“I absolutely adore my pendant, Evan!” Sarah exclaimed, her eyes shining as she looked down at the cherished gift, her fingers tenderly tracing its contours. “I can’t explain it, but it feels like a security blanket for me. Like a part of you that’s always with me.”

Evan’s face broke into a beaming smile, his heart swelling with joy at her attachment to his gift. He reached over and cupped her face, his eyes mirroring her excitement. “That’s exactly what I hoped it would be for you! I’m thrilled you love it so much.”

They continued their conversation, with Evan inquiring about her time with his friends and Sarah sharing her mixed emotions. Her nervousness grew as they rode nearer to the bar, and Evan did his best to comfort her.

Sarah pulled into the parking lot of Sluggers, a sudden, all-consuming terror engulfing her from the inside out. On the surface, she maintained her composure, her face betraying nothing of the turmoil raging within. But inside, a storm was brewing.

I’ve never been anyone’s girlfriend before, she thought, her heart pounding in her chest. What if I mess this up? What if his friends hate me? What if I don’t fit into Evan’s world?

The fear was visceral, unlike anything she’d ever felt before. It clawed at her insides, threatening to consume her whole. Her hand went to the pendant again, seeking comfort in its soothing touch, but even that couldn’t quell the rising panic.

Evan glanced at her, sensing something amiss but not grasping the full extent of her terror. “You’ll be fine,” he said, squeezing her hand. “But if you’re not ready, let’s go somewhere else.”

His words were meant to reassure, but they only heightened her anxiety. The weight of her new role, the uncertainty, the fear of the unknown--it was all too much, all at once. She forced a smile, willing herself to be brave, even as a voice in the back of her mind screamed in protest.

“No,” she said, determination lacing her voice. “It will make things worse if you don’t show up after scoring the winning run. They’ll know I caused you to be a no-show at the party. I’ll be okay.”

But as she stepped out of the car, her legs felt like jelly and a cold sweat broke out on her skin. This was a new world, and she was stepping into it alone, armed only with her feelings for Evan while paralyzed with the fear of looking like a fool.

The pendant lay against her skin, a physical reminder of Evan’s affection, but even that couldn’t silence the nagging doubt that gnawed at her soul. She was on the brink of something new, something terrifying, and there was no turning back.

In that moment, she knew she was facing a fear like never before, a challenge that cut to the core of her identity. But she also knew that she had to face it for Evan, for herself, and for their relationship.

With one last look at the luxury sedan, she closed the door on the safety and comfort it represented, stepping into the unknown, her heart both heavy with trepidation and alive with hope.

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**Scene #28: The Post-Game Party**

Sarah and Evan entered Sluggers Sports Bar and Grill, immediately embraced by the lively energy of sports enthusiasts and the tantalizing aroma of a backyard barbeque. Memorabilia adorned the walls, flat-screen TVs displayed various games, and the gleaming bar beckoned with its wide selection of drinks. Evan’s eyes sparkled with excitement as he gave the host Guido’s name, and they were seated at a reserved table made of polished wood.

As they settled in, friends began to trickle in, their faces glowing with pride and joy. High-fives, hugs, and handshakes were exchanged. Shout-outs went to Evan for scoring the winning run in the Enforcers’ latest win.

Sarah forced a smile, trying to engage, but felt like an outsider. No one spoke to her. She glanced at the door, secretly hoping Patti would walk through, her one connection in this crowd. But Patti was a no-show.

Where’s Patti? She’s the only one who talks to me.

The thought was interrupted by the larger-than-life entrance of Guido, who threw open his arms with flair and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, your hero, the Guido, has arrived! Now we can kick this lame party into high gear!” His voice rose above the din, his posture full of triumph and self-assurance.

Laughter and chatter escalated, the group reveling in the victory. The TV screens flashed with highlights, the faces of famous athletes watching over them, their successes immortalized on the walls.

But for Sarah, the laughter felt alienating, the noise overwhelming. She looked at Evan, so natural in this environment, so happy and proud. But she felt alone, disconnected.

“Hey, where’s Patti?” Evan asked Roxanne, puzzled by her absence, as he always saw her and Roxanne together at gatherings like this.

Roxanne’s eyes flickered to Sarah, a pointed glare in them, filled with unspoken blame. “She wasn’t feeling well,” she said, her voice cool, letting the words hang in the air. Her gaze lingered on Sarah a moment longer, ensuring her message was delivered without saying it outright. The unspoken message was clear to Sarah, though Evan remained oblivious.

Sarah’s heart sank. She had hoped that Patti might be her saving grace for the evening. She couldn’t understand Roxanne’s passive-aggressive glare implying it was Sarah’s fault that Patti didn’t show.

With no hope of a friendly face other than Evan’s, Sarah picked at her food, the taste of the hearty bar fare lost on her, the vibrant setting fading into a blur.

The celebration continued, friends engaging with the memorabilia, commenting on the games, and ensuring beers remained full. Guido was the life of the party, his loud voice filled with enthusiasm.

Sarah’s thoughts drifted to her past, her lifelong struggle to connect. Her successes and failures always so clear-cut, so black-and-white. And now, at this moment, she felt like a failure. Maybe I shouldn’t have broken my number one rule. I could be home right now, reading, studying, and stress-free.

She leaned over to Evan, her voice barely above a whisper. “Can we please leave?”

They left shortly after dinner, Evan making excuses about studying, protecting Sarah from his friends’ disappointment. His friends teased and tried to persuade him, but Evan stuck to his decision to leave.

During the walk to the car, Sarah’s emotions were in turmoil. She asked Evan to drive, holding back tears, refusing to cry from emotional duress.

“It’s not unusual for someone new to the group to be less talkative. Happens all the time.” Evan reassured her, his voice gentle.

Upon arriving at Evan’s apartment parking lot, Sarah exited the car and headed to the driver’s side. Evan’s warm, reassuring kiss, delivered just before she sat in the driver’s seat, provided a momentary balm to her inner turmoil. But the lingering distress was far from resolved. She pretended to feel better, forcing a smile as she drove away, leaving Evan at his apartment. As she headed home, the silence in the car became a heavy burden, amplifying her mind’s doubt and self-reproach. Her earlier feelings of isolation and failure were now her sole companions on the journey.

Did I make a mistake with Evan? Maybe I shouldn’t have entered this relationship with Evan. What was I thinking?

The questions lingered as she drove on, the lively atmosphere of Sluggers Sports Bar and Grill a distant memory, her struggle to connect a present reality.

# Chapter 7: Date Night at Sarah's Apartment

**Scene #29: Sarah Prepares Her Apartment for Evan's Arrival**

It was the Friday night following the Sunday softball game. The rain tapped on the windows of Sarah’s apartment, a soft accompaniment to the distant rumbles of thunder. Inside, the atmosphere was warm and cozy, filled with the soft glow of lamps and the scent of fresh flowers. Sarah carefully arranged study supplies and educational materials on the dining room table, her mind swirling with thoughts and emotions.

The dining room table, large and stylish, served more than just its apparent purpose. Sarah used it as a spread for her study materials. Its wooden surface gleamed under the light, a reflection of her meticulous nature.

Sarah needed to decide whether to cook or order out for her date with Evan. She only had a little experience as a cook. Her regular meal routine involved preparing simple, lean meals for the week ahead on Sunday nights. It was a time-saving method to ensure that she always ate properly. Indeed, there were better options than feeding Evan a previously prepared lean meal.

Tonight was about indulgence, about trying something new. Not knowing Evan’s preferences but trusting Katie’s advice that all college men, especially those from Chicago, were addicted to pizza, she’d placed menus from local pizzerias on the table. Sarah was sure she’d tried pizza in the past but couldn’t recollect when that was.

Sarah’s transformation from her stressful post-game party on Sunday to this calm and optimistic state was a journey she looked back on with a mix of amusement and relief. Her conversation earlier in the week with Katie had played a crucial role in bringing her to this point.

I overreacted, she thought, recalling Katie’s words. I made a mountain out of a molehill.

The wisdom in Katie’s advice struck her, reminding her of similar guidance she’d offered girls in her high school honor classes. She found humor in her dramatic reaction to a typical college party, knowing now that she would never let it turn into a crisis again.

Dressed in jeans, a casual pullover T-shirt, and slip-on shoes, Sarah moved to the mirror for a last-minute check. Her reflection showed a relaxed and confident young woman, ready for the evening. She liked her new look and the comfort of her clothes. She felt at ease.

Throughout the week, Sarah’s communication with Evan had been limited to texts. She’d been careful, taking time before replying. Though she wanted to respond instantly, talk to him on the phone, and see him in person, she’d intentionally slowed down, allowing herself time to catch up on her academic studies and nonprofit commitments.

Now, everything is in place, she thought, her heart light with anticipation.

Tonight was what she’d envisioned when she’d decided to enter a relationship with Evan. Just him and her, alone, enjoying each other’s company. An evening where she could let go and explore the emotional side of herself without any distractions.

A knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts. It was Evan. The sound resonated through the apartment, a herald of the night ahead.

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**Scene #30: Study Session First**

The rain poured down in torrents, a distant rumble of thunder announcing a storm that was still a ways off. Sarah stood at her apartment door, her heart pounding in her chest as anticipation bubbled within her. She peeked through the peephole just as Evan arrived, shaking the water from his umbrella before leaving it outside.

Opening the door, Sarah’s face broke into a giant smile, and she wrapped Evan in a warm hug, followed by a soft, sensual kiss. “I missed you,” Evan whispered, his voice filled with longing. “Four days felt like four weeks.”

Sarah’s heart swelled, and she echoed his sentiment, pulling him into more passionate kisses. But with a playful smile, she pulled back and wagged her finger from left to right. “Uh uh uh, Study first, kissing last.”

Evan’s brows shot up in confusion, but it all made sense when Sarah revealed her secret plan: a tutoring session to kickstart their date. Like a cute but reluctant child not getting his way, Evan eventually agreed, charmed by Sarah’s unexpected commitment to their agreement.

Once settled in, they began to study. Sarah’s dining room table was covered in books and study materials, all prepared with care. Evan’s initial reluctance faded as he realized the effort she’d put into the lesson. They worked together for the next hour. Sarah guided him with patience and clarity.

Occasionally, the sound of rain grew more intense, the distant flashes of lightning adding a sense of urgency to their task. Sarah paid attention to every detail, even bringing Evan his favorite beer, chilled to perfection.

Time flew, and the studying took on a rhythm of its own. Evan found himself drawn into the subjects, appreciating Sarah’s method of teaching and the way she made complex topics accessible.

Finally, the study session ended, and Sarah complimented Evan on his hard work. “I enjoyed this a lot more than I thought I would,” Evan admitted, a hint of surprise in his voice. “My sister is going to love you for helping me like this! I think I understand this better now, thanks to you.”

They indulged in a short-lived sensual kissing session before Sarah pulled away, her eyes twinkling. “Time to order dinner,” she said, waving the pizza menus in front of him.

As they browsed the options, the rain outside grew steadily worse, a distant thunder signaling the storm’s approach. But inside Sarah’s apartment, the atmosphere was warm and cozy, filled with the promise of a perfect date night.

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**Scene #31: Evan Slows His Roll**

Sarah ordered the pizza, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. She grabbed Evan’s hand and took him on a tour of her apartment. Everything seemed perfect, even the sudden flashes of lightning outside, adding drama to their evening.

Evan noticed some freshman textbooks in the guest room and asked about them. “My friend Katie uses this room as a study sanctuary,” she replied.

Evan’s eyes sparkled mischievously as they entered her bedroom, and he flirted, “This is already my favorite room.”

With mischief in her eyes, Sarah smiled and said, “I bet it is.” She continued the tour, ending with the kitchen, bathroom, and laundry room. Together, they looked out at the lightning dancing in the sky.

Evan confessed his love for watching movies on stormy nights. Sarah, surprisingly, told him she rarely watched movies or TV.

“That’s awesome!” Evan exclaimed. “I get to share all my favorite movies with you.” His enthusiasm seemed genuine, but something in his eyes held back, a secret hesitance he was not yet willing to share.

Soon, they were cuddled on the sofa, a blanket shared between them. Evan downloaded his streaming app, scrolling for a movie. The sound of the doorbell broke their comfortable silence.

“That must be the pizza,” Sarah said, hopping up. She opened the door to find the soaking-wet delivery man holding their dinner.

“Thanks,” she said, tipping him extra for braving the storm.

Back on the couch, with pizza and refreshments, they settled in. As Sarah bit into her pizza, the deep, rich flavors surprised her. This is better than I thought, she mused.

They continued watching, the thunder growing louder. Suddenly, a huge clap of thunder startled them. Sarah’s heart pounded, but not only from the storm. She realized how wonderful it felt just cuddling with Evan. She told him, giggling, and he smiled though his eyes seemed to say more.

Later, a deafening thunderclap shook the house, causing the power to go out. They laughed, using their phones as flashlights, lighting candles.

Back on the couch, the storm moving on, Evan looked into Sarah’s eyes. They kissed, slow at first, then more passionately. Sarah felt Evan’s hands wander, a desire building in her.

Yet, Evan’s touch was different, a push-and-pull that hinted at a battle within him. His kisses were intense, yet his hold was gentle as if he was restraining something.

Then, abruptly, Evan stopped. He stood up, walked to the kitchen, splashing water on his face.

Sarah, confused, followed. “Are you okay?” she asked, fearing she’d done something wrong.

Evan looked deeply into her eyes, his face serious. “I want to do this right,” he said. “Even if it means waiting to make love to you. I don’t want to rush.”

Sarah agreed though a part of her felt a strange relief, as if she’d known this was coming. They discussed when it would be right, though Evan had no clear answer. He said, “I suppose we will know when we will know.”

When the lights popped back on, Evan said he must go. They shared a slow, sensual kiss at the door, promising more but waiting for the right moment.

# Chapter 8: Sarah’s Parents Are Concerned

**Scene #32: Sarah's Parents Question Relationship with Evan**

Sarah leaned back on her sofa, her eyes half-closed as she let her mind wander to the recent date night with Evan. The sparkle of his green eyes, the quirk of his lips when he smiled, the way he'd listened so attentively as she'd shared her thoughts--everything about the night replayed in her head like a cherished film reel. Maybe this could be something good.

The shrill ringtone of her phone cut through her reverie like a serrated knife. Her eyes darted to the screen, and the name that flashed across it--Dad--made her heart sink.

Well, there it is. It was only a matter of time.

"Hello?" Her voice held a steady facade, though her pulse quickened.

"Sarah," her father's tone was grave, causing her to sit up straight on the couch, her muscles tensing. "We need to talk."

Taking a deep breath, she braced herself for the conversation that was about to unfold. With her mother's muted presence in the background, she knew this was a serious matter.

"Of course, Dad," she responded, her voice tinged with apprehension.

His questions came swiftly, like arrows aimed at her newfound relationship with Evan. She explained her perspective meticulously, her words carefully chosen to ease his concerns. She talked about the discussions she and Evan had, emphasizing their shared commitment to ensuring her academic and philanthropic efforts remained undeterred.

"But, Dad, I want you to understand that this doesn't change my focus. My work as a volunteer coordinator and my academic standing are still my priorities," she insisted.

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line, her father's contemplative silence filling the void. Then his voice returned, laden with skepticism.

"Sara, I appreciate your reassurances, but this is a significant step. How can you be so sure that your relationship won't distract you from your goals?"

Sarah's grip on the phone tightened. She understood his concern, and yet she felt a surge of frustration. "Dad, I've thought about this. Evan and I have discussed it. We both know what we want, and we've agreed that if anything threatens our priorities, we'll reevaluate."

There was a hint of exasperation in her father's tone. "A week, Sarah. It's only been a week. How well can you really know someone in that short time?"

"It's not about knowing everything, Dad," Sarah replied, her voice firm. "It's about being open to new experiences and giving myself a chance to explore something different."

Her mother's voice gently interjected. "Sarah, your father is just concerned. We both want what's best for you."

Sarah appreciated her mother's perspective, her anxiety ebbing slightly. "I know, Mom. And I promise, I won't let this relationship compromise my goals."

Her father's sigh was audible over the line. "Alright, Sarah. I just want you to be careful. You have a bright future ahead of you, and I don't want to see anything jeopardize that."

The phone call ended with the customary exchange of goodbyes. There were no utterances of love or warmth, but Sarah felt that, for a Wilkins family conversation, it had gone as well as it could. Still, as she disconnected the call, Sarah knew that her father's concerns had not been allayed.

He's worried. I get it. But I've got this under control. At least, I think I do.

Sarah pondered the unease in her father's voice, the slight tempering of concern in his final words. His doubts mirrored the tiny whispers of apprehension that had been gnawing at her. She shook her head, dispelling the thoughts.

# Chapter 9: Sarah Is a Fish Out of Water

**Scene #33: Sarah Feels Awkward at a Football Watch Party**

Sarah stepped into the grandiose great room, her eyes widening as she took in the sprawling space. The 20-foot ceiling added a cavernous feeling, intensifying the enormity of the room. On the wall, a 90-inch flatscreen TV blared pre-game commentary. A sea of Evan's friends occupied the luxurious sectional sofa and additional chairs, their eyes flicking from their conversations to the TV and back.

I don't belong here, she thought, as Evan led her further into the room, his hand warmly enclosing hers.

"Hey everyone, for those who don't know, this is my girlfriend Sarah," Evan announced, an excited grin on his face.

A chorus of "Hey Sarah!" and "Nice to meet you!" filled the air, but the greetings felt like echoes in a tunnel to her. She plastered a smile on her face, mimicking enthusiasm. Evan, buoyed by the atmosphere and the imminent game, was a stark contrast to her reluctance.

Just get through this, she urged herself, clinging to Evan's promise to be the designated driver for the night as a lifeline. A well-stocked kitchen lay adjacent to the great room, its marble countertops gleaming. "I see wine. Want some?" Evan asked, pointing to the fridge filled with a variety of drinks.

"Yes, please," Sarah replied, her voice a tad too eager.

As Evan poured her a glass of Pinot Noir, Sarah looked over at the game area to her left. Guido was already bent over a pool table, carefully aiming his cue. Nearby, a few others were playing a video game, their shouts blending into the cacophony of sounds surrounding the TV. It's just noise. All of it, she mused, taking a long sip of her wine.

The game started, and the room erupted into cheers and boos, depending on the plays. Every fumble or penalty drew shouts of indignation and obscenities. Sarah couldn't keep up; she didn't even want to. She glanced at Evan, who was engrossed, occasionally jumping up to high-five Guido or Roxanne as they cheered for the Bears.

"Isn't this exciting?" Patti leaned in to shout over the noise, her face flushed from excitement or alcohol--maybe both.

"Sure is," Sarah shouted back, empty words that tasted flat in her mouth.

Evan returned to his seat, squeezing Sarah's knee. "You okay?"

She forced a smile. "I'm fine."

As the night wore on, the energy in the room shifted. The Bears were losing miserably. One by one, Evan's friends migrated to the game area, engaging in drinking games and loud conversations. Through it all, Evan stayed by her side, his enthusiasm dimming as he picked up on her discomfort.

Once the game ended and the room let out a collective sigh of disappointment, Evan turned to her. "I think we're going to head out. I've got that test tomorrow."

Sarah felt a twinge of guilt. "I'm sorry I'm not more into this," she said as they said their goodbyes and navigated through the throng of people towards the door.

"Don't be. I should've known this wasn't your scene," Evan replied, wrapping an arm around her as they stepped into the cool night air.

They shared a tender, lingering kiss before parting ways, but as Sarah climbed into her car, doubt filled her mind. How will this work? Can it work? She felt the weight of her concerns like a stone sinking in a deep, endless pool.

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**Scene #34: Sarah Tells Katie about Her Relationship Concerns with Evan**

Sarah sat across from Katie at the small café table, her fingers nervously tracing the rim of her coffee cup. The ambient chatter of other students served as a muted backdrop to her swirling thoughts. What if Evan messes up? What if they laugh at him, or worse, look down on him?

Katie leaned forward, her brown eyes focused and attentive, like a lifeline. "You look like you're a million miles away, Sarah. What's going on?"

"I'm just... I'm worried about Evan," Sarah said, picking her words carefully. Her gaze fell to her half-eaten muffin. "I've been trying to fit into his world, Katie, and it's like I'm wearing shoes that are three sizes too small. It hurts."

Katie tilted her head, her pink hair catching the café's warm lighting. "I thought things were going great between you two."

"They are. But it's one thing to have a great relationship and another to fit into someone's life. I've been to his softball games, parties, even sat through an entire Monday night football game. But I felt like a fish out of water the whole time. His friends and I…we just don’t click. It's not a matter of time; it’s an impossibility."

A sympathetic frown tugged at Katie's lips. "That sounds tough. But people are different, Sarah. That’s okay."

Sarah's eyes met Katie's. "I know, but what worries me is this upcoming fundraiser. It’s an event I’ve organized, and Evan's coming. The crowd is older, wealthier--people who measure their words and scrutinize every little thing. I’m scared, Katie. What if Evan embarrasses himself? Or me? What if they don’t treat him well?"

Katie paused, choosing her words with care. "Sarah, you fell for Evan because of who he is, right? Not because of how well he schmoozes with philanthropists. And if he's as great as you say, then he'll rise to the occasion. Sometimes people surprise us in the best ways."

Sarah's fingers stopped their aimless circling around her coffee cup. She’s right. Evan is a good guy. He might not be used to the upscale, older crowd, but he’s adaptable. Isn’t he?

"Your words help, Katie. They do," Sarah said, offering a weak smile. "But the worries are still there. It's like this itch I can't reach."

Katie reached across the table, giving Sarah's hand a comforting squeeze. "Sometimes, all you can do is wait and see, and give people the chance to show you who they are in different situations. You can't control everything, and that's okay."

Sarah nodded, taking in Katie's counsel. She didn’t feel like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, but the burden seemed a little lighter, a bit more bearable. If nothing else, at least I have a friend who listens.

"Thanks, Katie," Sarah said, managing a more genuine smile this time. "Even if this doesn't solve anything, I’m glad I could talk to you."

"And I'm here whenever you need to talk, Sarah. Remember, life's a journey, and you don't have to walk it alone."

As they got up to leave, Sarah felt a mix of gratitude and lingering worry. She knew the upcoming event was a significant test--not just for Evan but for them as a couple. However, at least she didn’t have to face her fears entirely alone. And for that small mercy, she was deeply thankful.

# Chapter 10: Patti's Dilemma

**Scene #35: Patti Helps Evan Get Ready**

Patti sat on the worn-out couch in Evan’s living room, casually observing Guido as he paced back and forth between his room and the kitchen. His voice carried through the apartment, the notes of desperation barely hidden as he called every woman in his little black book, hoping for a night of fun. The mismatched furniture and the cluttered shelves filled with textbooks and memorabilia hinted at the lives of two college-aged bachelors.

How can two such different people be best friends? Patti wondered, her eyes tracing Guido’s erratic path. Evan was sincere and genuine, while Guido was... well, Guido. She’d asked Evan once, and he’d just smiled, brushing the question off with a comment about shared history. But as she watched Guido, the incomprehensibility of their friendship gnawed at her again.

Ironically, Patti’s thoughts mirrored the very dynamic of her own relationship with her roommate and best friend Roxanne, who was her opposite in nearly every way.

Patti’s thoughts were interrupted by a sudden exclamation from Evan’s room. “Patti! Can you come here a minute?” he called out, his voice tinged with frustration.

Guido shot her a knowing grin as she rose from the couch, leaving him to his desperate dialing. “Good luck with that,” he teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“What’s the matter?” Patti asked, stepping into Evan’s bedroom, a room that held both fond and conflicted memories for her.

Evan’s face was flushed, and his brows were furrowed in concentration as he wrestled with his tie. “I can’t get this thing right, and I don’t want to be late,” he admitted, a hint of embarrassment in his eyes. His nervousness about the night ahead was palpable, yet to him, this moment with Patti was just another friendly interaction, not laden with the weight it held for her.

Her heart ached as she approached him, a forced smile on her face. “Here, let me help you.” Her hands took over the task, expertly tying the knot as her mind wandered back to their blurred-line friendship and the complex emotions it now stirred within her.

Evan stared at his reflection in frustration. The tie simply refused to cooperate. His fingers fumbled as he tried to twist it into place again, but it kept coming out wrong. The evening with Sarah loomed large, a night filled with promise, and he couldn’t even get dressed properly.

A soft knock at the door brought a welcome distraction. “Come in!” he called out, still wrestling with the tie.

Patti entered, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. Evan’s struggle was evident, and she came forward, ready to help.

“Need some help there?” she asked, her voice cheerful but a touch strained.

Evan laughed, releasing the tie and stepping back. “I can’t seem to get this right. I feel like a teenager on prom night.”

Patti reached out, her fingers deftly taking over the task. “You’re not a teenager, and this isn’t prom night.” This is so much more, she thought, her heart aching with unspoken words.

Her hands worked on the tie, but her mind was elsewhere. In this very bedroom, they’d been intimate countless times, their “friends with benefits” relationship spanning several months. Now, she was helping him get ready for a date with another woman, in the very place where they’d shared so much together. The irony was almost too much to bear.

Evan chatted happily, oblivious to Patti’s inner turmoil. “Sarah’s so excited about this event. I just hope I don’t embarrass her.”

“You won’t,” Patti assured him, her voice steady despite the storm inside her. Just keep smiling. Keep being the friend he needs.

Her fingers finished the knot, and she stepped back, admiring her work. “There, perfect.”

Evan beamed, his nervousness replaced by excitement. “Thanks, Patti! You’re a lifesaver.”

He hugged her tightly, gratitude in his eyes. Patti returned the hug, her face buried in his shoulder. This is how it should be. This is how it has to be.

They parted, and Evan’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. “I think tonight’s going to be special.”

Patti smiled, her inner struggle hidden behind a mask of support. “I know it will be.”

As she spoke, her eyes watered, and a single tear dropped from each eye. Evan noticed and his face transformed from excitement to concern.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice filled with worry.

“Nothing,” Patti choked out, the lie tasting bitter in her mouth.

Evan pulled her into a warm hug, a gesture that brought both comfort and torture. For the first time, something in his eyes suggested that he was starting to understand. He pulled back, his gaze searching her face.

“Are you okay with my relationship with Sarah?” he asked, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Patti bit her lip, her heart aching with the truth she couldn’t reveal. She deflected his question, forcing a smile. “I’m just excited about your big night. That’s why I’m crying.”

Evan studied her for a moment, his eyes soft, but he seemed to accept her explanation. “Thanks, Patti. You’re the best.”

He hugged her again, his embrace full of gratitude, but also something more — a newfound awareness that lingered in the back of his mind. Patti returned the hug, her feelings a mix of relief and yearning.

They parted, and Evan’s eyes sparkled with anticipation once again. “I think tonight’s going to be special.”

As Evan left the room, Patti lingered, her hand tracing the spot where she’d tied his tie. The moment was over, but the feelings lingered. She sighed, knowing that she’d made the right choice, but it didn’t make it any easier.

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**Scene #36: Patti Seeks Advice from Guido**

Patti plopped down on the sofa after Evan left for Sarah’s fundraising event, her mind swirling with thoughts and emotions. Guido, still in the midst of a rather unfruitful journey through his little black book, looked up, noticing the distress in her eyes.

“I know you’re not my biggest fan, but if you need someone to talk to, I’m here,” he said, his voice surprisingly tender.

She looked at him, uncertainty in her eyes. Could I really talk to Guido about this? she wondered. After a moment’s pause, she decided to take the chance.

“Several of our friends have asked me to persuade Evan that his relationship with Sarah is misguided,” she confessed, her voice trembling slightly.

Guido’s eyes widened. He realized this would be a more extended conversation than he had hoped. Heading to the fridge, he grabbed two beers, opened them, and handed one to Patti. He took a guzzle from his bottle and sat on the loveseat perpendicular to the sofa, sharing the same end table. “You look like you could use this.”

She nodded, taking the beer. “You have no idea.”

“I don’t know if I can do it,” she told him, her voice breaking. “I still have feelings for Evan but still value Evan’s friendship.”

Guido looked at her sympathetically, not at all surprised. He’d always known. “What do you think of Evan and Sarah’s relationship?” she asked him, seeking an honest opinion.

Guido leaned back, considering his response. “I don’t get Evan. In my opinion, Evan should enjoy his college years as I do.” He comments how Evan has it easy. “Girls flock to Evan while I have to work for my hot honeys. If I were Evan, I’d play the field – A different girl every other night of the week. But Evan is Evan.”

Patti frowned, not quite getting the answer she sought. “Do you think she’s right for him?” she asked again.

Guido’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at her intently. “You want me to sugarcoat it, or do you want the Guido to give it to you raw?”

“Neither, really. But I guess there’s no point in you holding back, so give it to me raw,” she replied, bracing herself for his words.

He didn’t hold back. “Not that I could ever think like Evan regarding women, but I thought you and him were doing it right. You’re both in college, having fun, but no strings attached. You are smoking hot. I would’ve kept hooking up with you through senior year if I were Evan.”

Patti’s cheeks flushed at his bluntness. “What do you think about Sarah?” she asked, steering the conversation back.

“What I say here never leaves this room. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, of course. I won’t tell anyone, even Roxanne.”

“I don’t get it. I don’t get it at all. They have very little in common. But maybe that’s the point?”

“What do you mean?” Patti asked.

“I marvel at how Evan attracts women when he knows so little about them. I might even say I’m green with envy. I can only imagine what it’s like to have girls lined up at my front door.”

Patti’s eyes widened, trying to follow his train of thought. “I don’t understand your point.”

He looked annoyed by her impatience. “That’s because you didn’t let me finish. If it’s that easy for him to get a girl, then maybe what attracts him to Sarah is that although he reeled her in pretty quickly, for the first time, he experienced a girl who made him work for it. See what I mean?”

Could Guido actually be right? Patti thought, considering his words. “You may be right. I never really thought about it that way.”

Guido’s face lit up, a triumphant smile spreading across his lips. His chest puffed out, and he leaned back, clearly pleased with himself. “Of course I’m right. The Guido is always right!” he proclaimed, relishing Patti’s rare validation.

“Now that she’s been ‘caught,’” Patti said, air quoting the word caught. “Do you think he’ll lose interest and back away?”

“I know you may not wanna hear this, but the only way that relationship ends is if Sarah ends it. Evan is convinced she’s ‘the one.’ His words, not mine. Regardless of what you and I think, it’s impossible to derail Evan when he commits to something.”

“Why can’t he see what we all see? Sooner or later, that relationship is going to stop working. He needs to get out now before things get too serious.”

Guido shook his head, a look of amused frustration in his eyes. “Oh Patti, Patti, Patti, you’re not getting it. Evan is in love with Sarah, or at least he thinks he is. He won’t admit it, and nobody seems to understand this, but Evan is the epitome of a hopeless romantic. He is blinded by love. I doubt anything we say will open his eyes to reality.”

Patti’s heart ached at his words. Could she really do this? Could she really warn Evan off of Sarah? “I’m not sure what to do. As a friend, I think I should share what we all feel and warn him off Sarah. But I’m not sure if I trust my motivation. I don’t want to come off as a jealous ex.”

Guido’s eyes softened. “I decided to let Evan make his own mistakes. And be there for him when he inevitably crashes and burns.”

“Is that what you think I should do? Just back away and let him crash and burn? Hoping that when he sees Sarah’s not right for him, he may understand that there are better options for him, even if it’s not me.

“You gonna do what you’re gonna do no matter what I say. I know there’s nothing I can say to stop you from warning Evan off of Sarah. I can see it in your eyes.”

“I don’t want to, Guido. But Roxanne made it clear that if I don’t do it, she will. That would be a disaster on all levels.”

He nodded, understanding her dilemma. “I get it. Who knows, maybe something you say will click in Evan’s head down the road. But for now, understand that your words will fall on deaf ears. And then you’re left with a tough choice.”

“Choice?”

“Either tell Evan how you feel about him and press the issue with Sarah or do what I think you should do and be his friend and be happy for him if it works out and be there to catch him if he falls.”

Patti’s eyebrows shot up, her surprise evident. “That’s pretty sound advice coming from you.”

Guido leaned forward, his voice dripping with self-assured bravado. “Everyone always underestimates the Guido.” He punctuated the statement with a wink, his grin widening as if he were sharing a secret joke with the world.

“I don’t know if I can stand around waiting and watching him with Sarah.”

“Then don’t. Get yourself back out there. Hop back on that horse. Find yourself a dude to keep your bed warm at night. You still got almost two full years of college. Live it up!”

Patti laughed, “Now that’s the kind of advice I expected from you, Guido.”

Guido’s eyes danced with mischief, leaning back comfortably. “I’m not gonna lie. I’d be happy to fill that need for your right now. But no can do.”

Patti laughed loudly, throwing her head back. “I can’t wait to hear this. Why ‘no can do’?”

Guido grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief, never losing his casual demeanor. “I’m not gonna lie. I’d be happy to fill that need for you right now. But once a girl does Evan, she’s off-limits to the Guido. I don’t do my friends like that.”

Patti’s face turned bright red at his comment. “I’m not sure if I should be insulted or flattered.”

“Flattered, of course.”

“Of course.” She rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face.

Guido leaned back, sighing exaggeratedly, his hands spread in a dramatic gesture of defeat. “I gotta tell you, though, Patti. It ain’t easy. You’re the hottest piece of ass Evan’s ever hooked up with.” He paused, noticing a flicker in her eyes, a silent question that lingered in the air between them. “And yes, even hotter than Sarah,” Guido said with a wink.

Patti laughed again, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes wide with disbelief but unsure what to say. Guido’s shamelessness was both appalling and oddly endearing.

Before she could respond, Guido’s phone rang. It was a black book favorite returning his call. “I gotta go, Patti. I have a live one on the hook.”

He headed to his bedroom, leaving Patti to her thoughts.

Patti was left alone in the room, her emotions still in turmoil. She took one last look at the space where Evan had stood, feeling both grateful for Guido’s words and more confused than ever.

# Chapter 11: Sarah's Fundraiser

**Scene #37: Sarah Impresses**

Evan sat in the lavish lobby of The Grandeur Hotel, his heart racing with both excitement and nerves. The surroundings dripped with opulence, from the sparkling chandeliers to the plush velvet furniture. He glanced at his phone, anticipating Sarah’s instructions.

A text buzzed in, guiding him to the open bar of he Grand Ballroom on the third floor. His eyes widened at her consideration - his own hotel room, free drinks, no concerns about driving.

He made his way through the opulent hallways, eyes widening at the sheer luxury of it all. Gold-colored elevators carried him to the grand ballroom, large enough to host hundreds of dining guests. His eyes scanned the room, finally landing on Sarah.

There she was, tall and blonde, bouncing around the room, directing staff with authority and grace. He was captivated, seeing her in her element.

I’ve never seen her like this. She’s incredible.

He approached the bar, uncertainty tugging at him. The bartender, Jenni, a woman in her 30s, seemed approachable, her smile warm and friendly.

“First time at an event like this?” she asked.

“Is it that obvious?” Evan replied.

“A little bit. But Sarah told me you’d be coming. I’m Jenni. I’m going to guess that you’re Evan.”

“That I am,” he laughed.

“Sarah vouched for your age, so I won’t bug you for an ID. What’s your poison?”

“I have no idea what to order at a place like this. I don’t want wine or beer. Any suggestions?” Evan admitted.

Jenni’s smile widened as she whipped up a drink. “This’ll help loosen up your nerves, but I would take it slow.”

“What’s in it?” he asked curiously.

“Sarah tells me you’re in college. Although the drinks are free here, I figured I’d make you something you can afford when you return home. It’s a Jack and Coke.”

Evan took a small sip, his eyes lighting up. “I like it!”

“I thought you might. Just take it easy there, college boy. You don’t want to embarrass Sarah on her big night.”

“Have you known Sarah long?” he asked, intrigued.

“For about a year. I’m her first choice to tend bar for her fundraisers. She’s a great boss.”

“She is?”

“Don’t get me wrong, she is tough. She makes it clear what she expects; if you don’t deliver, you’re out. She doesn’t take crap from anyone. But if you’re good at your job, do what she asks of you without any attitude, she treats you well and makes sure that you get paid well.”

“I had no idea. I’ve been amazed watching her bounce around the room,” Evan said, admiration in his voice.

“That girl is versatile. Once the party starts, she works the room like a pro.”

Evan laughed, intrigued. “I’m not sure what that means.”

Jenni laughed in return. “It means she knows how to squeeze the dollars out of even the stingiest misers. I’m glad she’ll have someone beside her tonight to stave off the wolves.”

“Wolves?” Evan asked, concern creeping in.

“Don’t get me wrong, Sarah can hold her own with anyone in the room. She finds a way to shoo them away while still getting them to empty their pocketbooks through donations or overpaying on auction items.”

“Who does she shoo away?” Evan asked, fascination growing.

Jenni laughed loudly. “About half the guys you’re going to see tonight. Mostly older men, some of them married.”

Her laughter died down as she saw Evan’s worried expression. “Don’t worry, their money doesn’t impress Sarah. She may let them think they have a shot with her, but she always keeps it professional. She’s a pro.”

“So you’re telling me I don’t have anything to worry about?” he asked, hope in his eyes.

“You have nothing to worry about! Sarah’s not one to share details of her personal life, but when she mentioned you were coming to the event, her face lit up in a way I’ve never seen before.”

The words sank into Evan’s heart, solidifying what he already felt deep down.

She cares about me. And I’m in love with her.

They continued to chat until Sarah spotted Evan and approached the bar. Her eyes twinkled with excitement, and her smile warmed his soul.

“The usual?” Jenni asked Sarah, who nodded.

As Jenni served up Sarah’s wine, she gave Evan a welcoming, gentle hug, a silent promise of a beautiful night ahead. They exchanged smiles, and Evan knew, without a doubt, that he was where he was meant to be.

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**Scene #38: Sarah Preps Evan**

Evan couldn’t help but admire Sarah as she approached, her vibrant turquoise evening gown shimmering in the ballroom’s light. The fitted bodice with its modest sweetheart neckline adorned with intricate lace highlighted her grace and elegance, and the gentle train added a touch of sophistication.

“You look amazing, Sarah,” he said, his voice filled with genuine admiration.

Sarah’s eyes widened, taking in Evan’s well-fitted charcoal gray suit, soft blue dress shirt, and stylish maroon tie. “And you, Evan, look like you were born to wear that suit.” The outfit, though purchased on a budget, gave Evan a refined appearance, suitable for the elegant fundraiser event. It was a visual testament to his effort to fit into her world.

After Evan and Sarah exchanged compliments, she grabbed her glass of wine from the bar. “Come on, Evan. Let’s go talk somewhere privately,” she said, her voice filled with a mix of excitement and concern.

Evan’s eyebrows shot up in intrigue, but he obediently followed her. They wove through the crowd, past the coat check room, and into a small storage room. The door clicked shut behind them, creating an intimate space filled with the scent of freshly laundered linens.

“Is this the make-out room?” he asked, his voice brimming with the energy of a teenager in love. He leaned in for a kiss, his eyes twinkling.

Sarah’s laugh was soft and alluring, but her tone was firm. “Not here. This is my work. We have to keep it professional.” Her eyes were serious but playful, and Evan couldn’t help but be captivated by her dedication.

Evan leaned back, his lips curving into a teasing smile. “Why are we whispering? There’s no one here.”

“I have no idea.” Sarah laughed again, her anxiety momentarily forgotten. The sound was like a melody to Evan’s ears, and they both laughed, the tension easing.

Finally, Sarah’s expression shifted to one of focus and purpose. “I brought you back here because I wanted to prep you for the fundraiser. I should’ve done this earlier, but I got so busy.”

“Prep away!” Evan’s enthusiasm was infectious, his eyes bright with curiosity.

Sarah took a moment, her eyes searching his, her voice soft with concern. “Well, first, tell me how you’re feeling. Are you nervous?”

Evan’s response was genuine and thoughtful, his nerves laid bare. “I was extremely nervous when I left my apartment. I decided to call Liz on the two-hour drive to Chicago. She reminded me that no matter how wealthy or sophisticated a person is, they still put on their pants one leg at a time. They still sneeze, burp, cough, cry, and laugh. She also told me that, most importantly, rich or poor, the best people prioritize authenticity. If they don’t like me for who I am, then I should simply, as Liz calls it, ‘exit gracefully.’”

“And that’s all it took to calm your nerves?” Sarah’s voice was tinged with amusement, but her eyes were gentle, filled with understanding.

Evan’s face split into a grin, ever the comic. “Well, that and a little help from my friend Jack Daniels that your bartender introduced me to.”

They both laughed again, the room filled with the sound of their shared joy. Then Sarah’s face turned serious, her business look taking over. “This fundraising event is for the nonprofit organization, ‘Home Is Where the Heart Is.’ It was founded by a very wealthy businessman and gentleman named Marcus Chamberlain – think Morgan Freeman’s twin brother.”

“Gotcha!” Evan’s response was immediate, his mind working quickly to absorb the information.

“This is the third event I’ve organized for him. I like working for him because he’s not a jerk and gives me the autonomy to do the job right. He is quite distinguished, so be on your best behavior around him.” Sarah’s words were filled with a mix of pride and caution, her faith in Evan evident but tinged with a hint of anxiety.

Evan, ever attentive, repeated the critical components of words to help him remember. “Marcus Chamberlain, Home Is Where the Heart Is, best behavior. Got it!”

“What will the funds raised tonight be used for?” His question was genuine, his interest in the cause clear in his eyes.

Sarah’s answer was filled with passion, her belief in the cause shining through. “Home Is Where the Heart Is provides funds and volunteers to help low-income families rehab homes in disrepair. They also help rebuild uninsured or underinsured homes lost due to fire or natural disaster.”

“Wow! Those are good causes.” Evan’s admiration was evident, his respect for Sarah’s work growing by the moment.

“Yes, it is. I hope to top last year’s record for this annual fundraising event.” Sarah’s determination was palpable, her desire to succeed burning brightly.

“Who else do I need to know about? The bartender said I may have to defend you against some salacious wolves?” Evan’s words were accompanied by a humorously exaggerated boxer’s pose, his dukes held high.

Sarah’s laughter rang out again, her delight in Evan’s antics clear. “Just having you by my side will spook them away. It will be nice not to have to deal with them for once.”

She looked at her watch, her face falling slightly. “We’re out of time. Look, do your best. Don’t be offended or surprised if a bunch of people try to get you to donate money. Since no one knows you, they may think you’re a trust fund kid and see you as fresh meat.”

Evan’s face turned mock-serious, his eyes twinkling. “Can I get a kiss before we head out into the den of wolves?”

Evan found it amusing when his request for a quick kiss was met with a brief, paranoid glance around the room. He didn’t understand her caution, but her endearing paranoia brought a smile to his face.

“Alright, one quick kiss, that’s it.” Sarah’s words were firm, but her eyes were soft.

True to her word, Evan got a quick kiss, and that was it.

Sarah opened the door, peeked her head out, and looked both ways. With the coast clear, she and Evan walked down the hall toward The Grand Ballroom.

As they reached the edge of the grand ballroom, illuminated by the soft glow of crystal chandeliers and filled with the murmur of elegant conversations, Evan turned to Sarah with an air of traditional gallantry. His eyes met hers, and with a slight, gentlemanly bow, he extended his arm toward her. Understanding the timeless gesture, Sarah gracefully slipped her arm into his, allowing her hand to rest just above his elbow. With arms interlocked, they ventured into the mystery of the evening ahead, both excited and optimistic about what lay before them.

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**Scene #39: Evan Meets Morgan Freeman?**

Amidst the grand chandeliers and elegant finery of the Grand Ballroom at the Grandeur Hotel, the wealthy and sophisticated attendees were mingling, cocktails in hand. The glittering throng was abuzz with talk of charitable donations, and the anticipation of a night filled with generosity was palpable.

Mere seconds into their journey, Evan’s sharp eyes caught Marcus Chamberlain, Sarah’s distinguished boss. Unable to resist his comic ways, he nudged her, saying, “Hey Sarah, Morgan Freeman showed up!”

Sarah’s eyes widened in horror. “Shh, Evan, someone might hear you. Don’t look his way. We need to warm you up a bit before I introduce you.”

The playful sparkle in Evan’s eyes betrayed his nerves, and he grinned. “Too late. Morgan is on his way. Should I ask for his autograph?”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed, unamused by Evan’s jokes. She immediately flashed a smile she’d been practicing since she attended her first fundraiser at 12 years old. Out of the corner of her mouth, she whispered, “Be professional.”

Marcus Chamberlain looked over at Sarah and Evan and began walking their way, his eyes fixed on the new face accompanying his trusted employee.

Marcus is coming over. I hope Evan does well, Sarah thought, her anxiety bubbling beneath her professional demeanor.

Marcus approached with a beaming smile, praising Sarah, “Sarah, you’ve done a great job here. I’m very impressed!”

“Thank you, Mr. Chamberlain-” Sarah began, only to be interrupted.

“Please, not so formal. Call me Marcus,” he said with a warm grin.

“Thank you, Marcus, for trusting me with such a prestigious event. I am honored to be associated with your organization.”

Marcus’s eyes drifted to Evan, his curiosity piqued. “Ah, a new face. Who have you brought with you today?”

Sarah’s voice held a note of pride. “This is my boyfriend, Evan.”

Evan and Marcus engaged in a firm, appropriate handshake, a mutual respect exchanged in the simple gesture. “Nice to meet you, Evan,” Marcus said, his voice sincere.

“A pleasure to meet you as well, Marcus,” Evan replied, his excitement bubbling over into a charming grin.

So far, so good, Sarah thought, feeling good about how the conversation had started.

“So, you’re Sarah’s boyfriend?” Marcus inquired, his eyes twinkling.

Evan smiled and said, “My proudest accomplishment to date!”

His response caused Sarah concern, but Marcus chuckled, easing the tension. “Have you had a chance to look at the items up for auction?”

Evan’s eyes brightened. “I took a quick peek on my way into the ballroom. I’d give my right arm for those Bears tickets on the 50-yard line!”

Sarah’s concern notched up to minor anxiety, and she glanced at Evan, trying to figure out how to silently remind him to stay focused on the nonprofit organization.

Marcus’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Are you a Bears fan?”

Evan’s animated facial expression and exaggerated nod increased Sarah’s concern and anxiety, but Marcus chuckled again. “It’s a blind auction. I think bidding starts in a few minutes. Who knows, maybe you’ll have the winning bid.”

Unaware that Sarah was dying of anxiety inside, Evan continued his comic ways. “You see this suit? It’s nice, isn’t it?” he joked, tugging on the lapels of his suit jacket.

Marcus looked a bit confused but played along. “Quite nice, yes.”

Evan’s next words sent Sarah’s heart racing. “I would love to bid on those tickets, but this suit represents the last dollar in my bank account.”

Although meant to be humorous, It was also very true.

Sarah wanted to disappear, but then something unexpected happened. Marcus cracked up at Evan’s joke. “Sarah, I love this guy. He’s hilarious!”

Sarah remained paralyzed in her smile, unsure how to respond, her mind whirling. Is this really happening?

“I understand,” Marcus continued, his voice filled with understanding. “I was young and always short on cash back in the day. But you know our organization does great work. Would you consider donating your time? We are always in need of volunteers.”

Evan’s sincere response notched down Sarah’s anxiety. “I would love to help out! Sarah told me about the great work ‘Home Is Where the Heart Is’ does.”

Sarah’s was thrilled that Evan remembered the name of the organization. Marcus was equally impressed. “I’m glad to hear that! Sarah can give you the details. She’s in charge of the project. Two weeks from today, we’ll be helping folks clean up what’s left after a tornado hit a town not far from where Sarah lives. Do you think you can make it that Saturday?”

Evan’s enthusiasm was infectious. “Count me in! I’m sure I can recruit a handful of friends to help volunteer as well.”

Sarah finally found her voice, her anxiety decreased, excitement replacing it. “Really? Who do you think will come?”

Evan’s playful humor returned as he considered. “Patti is a lock! This is right up her alley, and wherever Patti goes, Roxanne goes. I’m sure I can get Guido to commit, and I think I could convince three or four more friends to help out.”

Sarah’s surprise was evident. “Guido? I wouldn’t think he’d be interested in volunteering.”

Evan looked at Marcus, half serious, half joking. “Will there be single adult females volunteering?”

Marcus saw where Evan was going and played along. “I’m sure there will be plenty.”

“That’s a great incentive. We’ll add a six-pack of beer for a job well done, and Guido will be in!” Evan declared, his eyes twinkling.

Sarah wanted to crawl under a rock, certain that talk of single females and 6-packs of beer were not appropriate things to say to Marcus. But as before, Marcus laughed even louder than he had before. “I can’t wait to meet this Guido fella.”

Evan comically rolled his eyes. “Believe me, you can wait.”

Both men flowed in laughter, and Sarah’s anxiety began to ease. Marcus then inquired about the auction, and with an unexpected generosity, offered the Bears tickets to Evan if he could recruit his friends to volunteer.

Evan’s shock and gratitude were evident. “Are you sure?” he asked, his voice filled with disbelief.

“I’m positive,” Marcus assured him. “A handful of young volunteers is worth much more than we’ll get at auction for those tickets.”

Marcus turned to Sarah. “Can you pull the Bears tickets off the auction table?”

Sarah’s mind was a whirlwind, but she managed to stammer, “I’ll go get them right now.”

Marcus called out to her just as she started walking away. “Sarah, those are valuable tickets. Put them somewhere safe.”

Sarah turned to Marcus and nodded confirmation, her eyes wide with understanding.

Marcus then continued to answer Evan’s question, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Decent quarterback? The Bears? Probably in the year 2000 never?”

Both men laughed, their voices ringing through the grand ballroom. Other men started joining the conversation, talking about the Bear’s quarterback woes and other sports-related topics, adding to the jovial atmosphere.

As Sarah left, their voices faded into the background, the sound of camaraderie and good-natured banter lingering in her ears. Her mind spun as she processed the unexpected connection between Evan and Marcus, two people she had never expected to bond so quickly. Surprised, even shocked, she found herself unable to shake her confusion as she made her way across the room.

What just happened? she wondered, the question echoing in her mind as she continued to move, her steps automatic. The evening had taken an unexpected turn, leaving her feeling both bewildered and oddly reassured.

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**Scene #40: Evan Impresses**

Sarah’s hand trembled as she grabbed the Bears tickets from the auction room table, glancing over her shoulder at the buzz of the ongoing event. Mr. Chamberlain said these were valuable and put them somewhere safe, she thought. Evan was mingling well, so she took the opportunity to run up to her room and put them in the hotel room safe.

As the door to her suite at the Grandeur Hotel swung open, she was taken aback by the breathtaking view of the city skyline, framed perfectly by floor-to-ceiling windows draped in sumptuous silk curtains. The room bathed in a gentle golden glow from the crystal chandeliers, and the rich mahogany furniture added a touch of elegance that reflected the evening’s tone. She swiftly opened the safe and put the tickets inside, feeling a curious mixture of pride and uncertainty.

As she did, thoughts of Evan welled up within her. She had considered booking them in the same room but didn’t feel ready yet. Would Evan be upset? she wondered, her heart aching at the thought. Could he understand why we must sleep in separate rooms?

Heading back to the bar, she was met with a knowing smile from Jenni, the bartender. The familiar clink of her favorite wine being poured was comforting.

“Your boy is doing pretty well out there,” Jenni said, eyeing Evan as he chatted with Marcus.

Sarah’s eyebrows shot up. She described how horrified she’d been when Evan approached Marcus with the casual attitude of an old friend, only to find that they bonded over football like they had been buddies for years.

“Boys will be boys,” Jenni laughed.

Sarah watched Evan going from group to group, shaking hands so often that it looked like he was at a square dancing competition. She mumbled to herself, “I just don’t get it!”

“What do you mean?” Jenni asked.

“Never mind, I was talking to myself,” Sarah replied, brushing off the question. Yet Jenni’s persistence led Sarah to open up, and she poured out her feelings.

She shared how she felt like an outsider with Evan’s friends, how they spoke a different language. But here, Evan was thriving in her world, talking with Marcus like a college buddy, even receiving NFL tickets as a gift.

Jenni pointed out that Marcus, and likely many of the other esteemed guests, probably found Evan’s approach refreshing. Unlike others who approached Marcus as an esteemed business leader, Evan had treated him like just one of the guys, as he would anyone he first met. This casual, genuine interaction was a breath of fresh air in a room filled with formality. Sarah was quiet for a moment, deep in thought, contemplating the uniqueness of Evan’s approach.

“I don’t think I can hold back anymore. I’m not sure I want to,” she said, her voice soft and full of realization. “I think Evan has melted my protective ice castle to the ground. Do you know how I am feeling about him right now?”

“Impressed, inspired, dazzled?” Jenni guessed.

Sarah laughed, her eyes shining. “Yes, all those things! But more than anything, it turns me on.”

Jenni burst into laughter, surprised by Sarah’s revealing comment. “Are you gonna do something about that?”

“I wish,” Sarah sighed, looking at her watch. “Dinner starts in about 10 minutes.”

Jenni saw Sarah in deep thought and asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“What is a quarterback?” Sarah blurted, causing Jenni to break out laughing.

Evan noticed Sarah at the bar, and after receiving a business card from a tech company owner, he headed over to see her. He showed her the card, excited about the opportunity.

Evan, feeling Sarah grab his hand and yank him toward the storage room, losing his balance slightly, managed to blurt out, “Where are you taking me?” His question was met with a sly grin from Sarah. “The make-out room,” she announced, her eyes dancing with mischief.

Evan’s expression showed excitement, and when they reached the room, Sarah shut the door and pushed him against it. “We only have five minutes, let’s make it count!” she exclaimed, leaning in and kissing him with great intensity and passion.

Their lips met, and the world outside ceased to exist. The kiss was a vivid testament to their connection, to the barriers broken and the newfound intimacy they shared. It was the taste of commitment, of letting go, and of embracing love, even if it was meant to last only for a season.

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**Scene #41: Evan Professes His Love**

With the fundraiser behind them, Evan and Sarah made their way hand-in-hand to the hotel elevators, their faces glowing from the shared success of the night. The event had gone off without a hitch, transcending both of their highest hopes. They had eaten, laughed, and charmed the attendees, their effortless synergy captivating everyone in the room. Sarah’s poise and zeal had been instrumental, contributing to an astounding 10% increase in donations compared to the previous year.

As Evan witnessed Sarah take command of the room, his feelings for her transformed into something profound. He saw a side of her that was uniquely vibrant and driven. Any lingering doubts or uncertainties evaporated; he knew now, without reservation, that he was in love with Sarah. There was no turning back.

While waiting for the elevator, Evan turned to Sarah, his eyes glowing. “You were incredible tonight. I’ve never seen anyone work a room like that before.”

Sarah laughed, a soft blush coloring her cheeks. “And you, Evan, you were amazing. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

The elevator door dinged open, and they stepped inside, continuing to gush over each other’s performance. The air between them was charged with excitement and admiration.

When the elevator opened, Evan walked Sarah to her hotel room door, where their kisses were slow, soft, and sensual.

“I hope you aren’t upset that I booked us in separate rooms. I’m not sure that I’m ready,” Sarah said, looking up at him with a mix of hope and uncertainty.

“Upset? A free room all to myself in a five-star luxury hotel? Why would I be upset?” Evan replied, his smile genuine.

“I know I’m moving kind of slow compared to other college girls my age,” Sarah continued, but Evan interrupted her, his voice gentle but firm.

“I’m not bothered by the speed of our relationship at all,” he reassured her, looking into her eyes with a sincerity that touched her heart. “It’s so easy to get sex these days. But having what we have is special. It’s something that can’t be manufactured or forced. It just is.”

“What is it you find special about us?” Sarah asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Evan took a few minutes to answer, his gaze penetrating her more profoundly than ever before. “Sarah Wilkins, I’m in love with you. And I’ll wait for eternity to make love if that’s how much time you need.”

He leaned in and kissed her soft and sensually. Sarah had never had anyone tell her they loved her in this way. Her body shivered from head to toe. She wanted to reciprocate Evan’s words of love, but she couldn’t get the words out.

“Evan, I’m afraid –” she began, but he interrupted her, putting his index finger gently over her lips.

“Shh. You don’t need to say anything before you’re ready. I will cherish the moment you tell me you love me, but I only want to hear it when all fear and doubts are gone.”

Evan leaned in and gave Sarah a final sensual kiss that caused her body to tremble even more. Without saying anything more, he headed to his room.

Evan’s words weren’t just spoken; they were felt, igniting a fire within Sarah that consumed her entire being. It was a love so new, so fresh, and so powerful, it reverberated in the very core of her soul, leaving her body trembling uncontrollably. I never knew love could feel like this, she thought, awash with a sensation that transcended mere words. The profundity of the moment hung in the air, forever altering her understanding of what it meant to be loved. I never could’ve imagined how good hearing those words would feel. It was not just a statement, but a promise, a turning point that marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life, filled with a passion and connection she never thought possible.

# Chapter 12: Sarah and Evan Consummate Their Relationship

**Scene #42: Sarah Relaxes in the Tub**

Sarah’s heart was aflutter as she turned to open her hotel room door, Evan’s heartfelt words echoing in her ears, the soft press of his lips still fresh on hers. She stumbled, her hands shaking uncontrollably, as she fumbled with the key card. Finally, it clicked, and she stumbled into her hotel room. He loves me, she realized, her soul rejoicing at the thought.

When she entered the lavish bathroom of her suite, she was overwhelmed by its elegance. Pure white marble gleamed in the soft, intimate lighting, a claw-footed bathtub inviting her to indulge, and a glass-encased shower that promised a cascade of warm comfort. The details were rich, the fittings golden, and the atmosphere filled with an intoxicating scent that beckoned her closer.

Driven by an unseen force, she began to run the bathwater, adding drops of rose-scented oil that soon filled the room with an alluring fragrance. As she stepped into the tub, she felt as though she were stepping into a dream, every part of her tingling with a sensation that was both surreal and beautiful.

In the warm embrace of the water, her mind drifted back to the magical evening she had shared with Evan. She remembered every word, every look, every touch. His profession of love was like a melody that played in her heart, a song she wanted to hear over and over again. A smile played on her lips as she recalled the tenderness of his kiss.

She lingered in the bath, lost in thought, until the water grew cool. Rising, she wrapped herself in a luxurious robe, as soft as Evan’s promises and as warm as his affection.

She dried her hair, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotion and longing. His words came back to her, his promise to wait for her, his desire to hear her say the words only when she was ready. She looked at herself in the mirror, her eyes shining with a decision. I love him, she admitted to herself, her heart swelling with joy.

With a newfound determination, she dressed and prepared herself, knowing that the night was far from over. She reached for the phone, requesting Nina, a staff member she knew she could trust.

Her hand trembled as she wrote a note, sealing it and another item in an envelope, addressing it to Evan with a loving flourish.

When Nina arrived, Sarah handed her the envelope and a tip, her voice soft but firm. “Please deliver this to Evan’s room.”

Nina’s knowing smile was her only answer, leaving Sarah standing at the threshold, her heart brimming with anticipation, love, and a thrilling sense of destiny.

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**Scene #43: Evan's First Luxury Hotel Room**

With a tremble of anticipation, Evan’s fingers danced over the room’s electronic card reader, the soft beep of acceptance granting him entrance into the realm of luxury. The door swung open, revealing the sumptuous suite, an extravagant oasis that contrasted sharply with his modest upbringing. His eyes widened, and a bright smile spread across his face as he stepped into a room that looked like it had been crafted in the dreams of a child entering Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory.

Oh, my... His mind stumbled over words as he looked around the suite. Rich fabrics adorned the furniture, and glimmering chandeliers danced with reflected light. Evan’s eyes were drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a panoramic view of downtown Chicago. To the left, skyscrapers loomed like glowing titans, windows sparkling, the streets beneath brimming with the hustle and bustle of nightlife. To the right, Lake Michigan stretched out, a serene oasis, its waters reflecting the distant city lights in a mesmerizing dance of shadows and illumination.

He moved towards the mini-fridge, a treasure trove of delights with a thoughtful touch from Sarah. There on the refrigerator door, a sticky note with her handwriting brought a giggle from his lips: “Evan, help yourself. - Sarah.”

The night called for a shower, and as Evan stepped into the vast room, he was struck by its enormity. It’s the size of a football field! he exaggerated joyfully in his mind. Water cascaded down, and as he luxuriated in its warm embrace, his thoughts drifted back to the evening with Sarah. For the first time, he’d told a woman that he loved her, and those sweet, unspoken words reflected in her eyes, confirmed in her kiss, left him giddy, floating on cloud nine.

After the shower, he stood in front of the mirror, his sculpted, athletic body still glistening with droplets of water. As he brushed his teeth and combed his hair, he couldn’t help but revel in the reflection of a man who had found love.

The king-size bed beckoned him, and with a gleeful leap, he landed on the plush mattress. A contented smile danced on his lips as he relaxed into the pillows, remote in hand, the television springing to life with a soft glow. His heart felt light, his soul embraced by the comfort of luxury and the intoxication of love.

Then, a soft tapping at his door, followed by the whisper of paper gliding across the floor. Curiosity piqued, he rose and discovered an envelope bearing his name. Inside were two treasures: a hotel key card and a note in Sarah’s handwriting. His heart skipped a beat as he read, “I’m Ready! Love, Sarah.”

A thrill shot through him, and his pulse quickened with anticipation. His lips curled into a knowing smile, excitement bubbling up within him like champagne. The evening had evolved into a symphony of emotions, and he was ready to embrace the melody it offered.

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**Scene #44: Sarah and Evan Make Love**

After Nina had left to deliver the envelope to Evan, Sarah felt a wave of fear wash over her like a tide, leaving her stranded in an ocean of uncertainty. Her inexperience in true intimacy within a loving relationship left her feeling vulnerable and unsure. If only I had planned this ahead of time, I would have purchased elegant lingerie for the moment. But none of what I have will suffice. She decided to undress completely and lie in bed beneath the covers, caution, and genuine anticipation marking this significant step in their relationship.

Sarah’s heart pounded in her chest as she heard the key card unlocking the door, a sound that seemed to reverberate through the room. The door opened, and Evan entered, his eyes widening and his breath catching as he saw her. She was like a delicate flower, petals yet to unfurl, awaiting his gentle touch. The soft glow of the room’s lighting reflected in her eyes, filled with longing and trust. They shared a knowing smile, a promise without words.

Evan, presuming she was nude beneath the blanket, began to shed his own clothing, each piece falling away as if they were barriers keeping him from his destiny. The longing in his eyes was mirrored by his hastened breath as he finally slid under the blanket next to her. Sarah lay rigid and stiff, hands clutching the blanket, her body a frozen testament to her fear. Evan leaned in and kissed her gently, his lips whispering reassurances.

Evan’s kiss was a soft touch, but it did not free Sarah from her frozen state. “I don’t have experience making love. I don’t think I’m going to be any good at it, at least not the first time,” she confessed, her voice trembling like a delicate leaf.

Evan chuckled, the sound rich and warm. He sought to ease her mind. “Before we kissed for the first time, did you think you weren’t going to be any good at kissing?” he asked, his question wrapping around her like a gentle embrace.

Sarah pondered his words, her body slowly unwinding. “I didn’t have time to think about it. The kiss happened naturally,” she admitted, then continued with newfound resolve. “If I had thought about it, I would not have expected to be any good at kissing.”

Evan’s smile was a soft caress, a tender acknowledgment of her fears. “Let me tell you. That kiss and every kiss since has been amazing. However it goes tonight, it’s going to be incredible. Because, I love you, and that’s what matters.”

Sarah reveled in the artistry with which Evan effortlessly wove threads of positivity into the fabric of her thoughts, gently steering her from the shadows of uncertainty into the warm embrace of optimism.

His words reached into her soul, thawing the ice of her fears. Her body relaxed, and her eyes watered with emotion. “I love you too, Evan. I love you so much!” she declared, the words a symphony to his heart.

No words were needed from Evan. His face, his smile, told her everything. Love had spoken.

The final act of their union was one of gentle discovery and profound connection. Sarah released her tight grip on the covers, surrendering to the sensation of his touch. Their kisses were soft and sensual, a dance of love that awakened her body’s desire. Sarah’s body tingled from head to toe as Evan’s hands explored her body. She found her hands reciprocating, an instinctive response to his touch. The feel of his sculpted body ignited her passion.

Evan slowly and gently rolled on top of her, his eyes a silent plea, seeking her consent. A gentle smile and a nod was all he needed. In that sacred moment, they became one, making soft, sensual love, cementing an emotional bond that neither of them had ever felt before.

# Chapter 13: Evan Volunteers for the Weekend

**Scene #45: Evan and A Few Friends Volunteer**

The devastation was a bleak painting of chaos; broken fences lay strewn across fields, uprooted trees peppered the ground like forgotten monuments, and houses and barns once robust and proud, now lay in tatters, incapable of withstanding tornado force winds. A hush of despair hung over the farmlands of central Illinois, but it was about to be disturbed by hope and community spirit.

Sarah and Marcus were standing together, finalizing the plans for the Saturday project. She held her clipboard tightly, the papers filled with meticulous details, a testament to her organizational skills. The time was 8 AM, and they were waiting for the last few volunteers to arrive.

Just then, Evan, Guido, Patti, Roxanne, and a few others walked toward them, their energy contagious. Guido was already pointing out the “hot chicks” that had volunteered, reminding Evan about the promise of beer. Evan’s eyes, however, were locked on Sarah. She looked up, caught his smile, and subtly shook her head to deter any public display of affection. Evan understood and fell back with his friends, content to wait for a private moment.

Marcus was the first to approach them, his hand extended to Evan. “It’s great to see you again. I see you brought your crew with you.” He eyed Guido, smiling, “You must be Guido.”

“Damn right I am,” Guido responded, shaking Marcus’s hand with enthusiasm.

Evan’s face reddened, and he quickly apologized for his friend, but Marcus just laughed and handed over four Bears tickets, a reward he had promised.

Guido’s eyes widened, and he exclaimed, “I better get one of those!” Roxanne, still harboring a dislike for Sarah, sarcastically added, “I’m pretty sure he’s going to take his girlfriend.”

Unfazed by Roxanne’s attitude, Sarah calmly said, “I think you four should go. Football is not really my thing, and I know you guys will have a great time.”

After the brief exchange, Marcus gave a heartfelt update to all the volunteers, thanking them for their dedication and explaining the extent of the damage. Handing the reins over to Sarah, he left for other meetings.

Sarah, always well-prepared, gave everyone their assignments, outlining her plans for the day. She handed out gloves and hard hats, ensuring everyone had what they needed.

As Sarah finished handing out the hard hats and gloves, Katie sprinted up, apologizing profusely for being late. Her face was flushed, and she looked around at the bustling volunteers, feeling out of place.

“What did I miss?” she asked Sarah, her voice tinged with concern.

Sarah laughed, her clipboard firm in hand, and shook her head. “No Worries, Katie. Just follow Evan and his friends. They’ll fill you in on what you need to do.” She handed Katie a pair of gloves and a hard hat.

“Sure, sure,” Katie replied, slipping on the gloves.

“I’ll need some assistance buying food and refreshments for the volunteers at 11 AM,” Sarah explained, holding her clipboard tightly. “It’s a lot to carry for one person. Can you meet me then?”

Katie smiled, relieved to be of help. “Sure, I’ll meet you back here at 11 AM. Or should I meet you somewhere else?”

“Here is fine,” Sarah said before she changed her mind. She pointed to a mobile on-site office nearby. “Actually, meet me in our mobile office. We’ll head out from there.”

The scene ended with them heading off in separate directions, a sense of anticipation and energy in the air. Sarah’s clipboard, filled with plans and schedules, was her shield and guide, ensuring the success of the day ahead. The volunteers were ready, the friendships were blooming, and a hard day’s work awaited them all.

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**Scene #46: Katie Discovers Sarah's Secret**

Katie’s phone alarm went off. It was 10:45 AM, a signal that it was time to head to the mobile control center. Sarah had asked her to meet there at 11 AM to help get food for the volunteers and the families impacted by the tornado.

Nestled at the edge of a small community ravaged by the recent tornado, the mobile office stood as a monument to resilience and necessity. It wore its age like a badge of honor, with peeling and faded paint, streaked with the patina of years, bearing the scars of weather and time. Katie’s eyes took in the devastated landscape outside as she approached, a constant reminder of the purpose that had breathed new life into this old mobile home.

Upon entering, she was greeted by the scent of old paper and dust, a tangible presence of its age and storied past. Her eyes drifted over the sturdy metal desks, dulled by scratches and dents but still supporting the burden of the task at hand. They were lined up against worn paneling, surfaces cluttered with maps, reports, and tools. The flickering fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting a harsh glow over the room. In one corner, the coffee maker wafted the aroma of fresh brew, mingling with the mustiness of the room.

Amidst the chaos, Sarah sat at her desk, a serene presence in the eye of the storm. Volunteers and workers bustled about, their voices a cacophony of determination and compassion, but Sarah’s focus never wavered. Every task was met with unflinching resolve, every challenge transformed into an opportunity. To Katie, it seemed as if Sarah was expertly orchestrating a symphony of events, her soul resonating with the satisfaction of a maestro who knew the true melody of her calling.

After about 15 minutes, Sarah finished assisting those in line. Her composed face broke into a smile as she got up and walked over to Katie. “Let’s go!” she exclaimed.

In the car, Katie couldn’t help but share her observations. “I’m so impressed with your effort, Sarah. You really work hard.”

Sarah modestly brushed off the compliment. “It’s nothing special,” she said. They chitchatted about the day’s events, their conversation eventually turning to Evan’s friends.

Katie’s voice lowered, almost to a whisper. “I don’t think that girl, Roxanne, likes you very much. I’d keep my eye on her if I were you.”

Sarah’s face tightened. “You noticed too? I don’t know why she hates me so much.”

“Maybe she’s crushing on Evan?” Katie suggested.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders, clearly wanting to move on from the subject. “All the sandwiches and drinks should be ready when we arrive. Normally I hire a caterer, but I wanted to support the local businesses.”

As they pulled into the drive-through of a bank ATM, Katie watched Sarah withdraw the maximum amount allowed, adding it to an already substantial amount of cash in her wallet. Her curiosity piqued, she asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s with all the cash?”

“I need it to pay for the food and drinks,” Sarah replied, her voice tight.

“Don’t they take credit cards?”

“They do.”

Katie’s confusion deepened. “Doesn’t Marcus give you money for the food?”

Silence filled the car as Sarah’s expression closed off. But Katie’s curiosity wouldn’t be satisfied, and realization dawned on her face. “Oh my gosh, Sarah. You’re paying for all this out of your own pocket, aren’t you?”

Sarah’s silence spoke volumes, and Katie’s admiration grew. “Can’t you use your dad’s credit card, or would he be upset?”

Finally, Sarah revealed her secret, her voice soft with conviction. “He thinks I devote too much of my time to my volunteer work. He thinks I should divide my time between volunteer work and networking with the business community. But, to answer the question, he would not complain if I used the credit card to feed everyone.”

“So you voluntarily pay for everything?” Katie asked, her eyes wide with admiration.

“It’s no big deal, My father provides me with a monthly stipend that more than covers my needs,” Sarah said, her voice gentle. “I’m glad to share it with families in need and the volunteers that devote their time and effort to help others.”

“The more I get to know you, Sarah, the more impressed I am. I hope to be more like you one day,” Katie whispered, her voice filled with genuine respect.

Sarah blushed, then chuckled. “I’ve had those very same thoughts about you.”

The girls laughed, their exchange of admiration strengthening their bond.

Sarah and Katie arrived at a small sandwich shop in a nearby small town. Katie watched in awe as Sarah dished out around $700 for the food and a large tip for the staff. With sandwiches and beverages in hand, they headed back to the project work site, the sun high in the sky, signaling the approach of midday.

As they drove, Sarah glanced over at Katie, her eyes softening. “Katie, about what we talked about earlier, would you mind keeping it between us? I don’t want anyone to know about my paying for the meals.”

Katie looked at her friend, her respect for Sarah deepening. “Of course, Sarah. Your secret’s safe with me.” Her voice held a warm assurance, confirming the trust between them.

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**Scene #47: Lunch is Served**

Sarah and Katie pulled into the work site, the car packed with food and beverages. Evan and Guido were on hand to help, and the volunteers, hungry from their morning’s work, waited eagerly at the picnic tables.

But no sooner had they begun to unload than a licensed handyman interrupted, urgency in his voice. “I hate to interrupt your lunch, Sarah. But we have a potential fire hazard at one of the houses we are working on. It’s only a few miles away. I need someone in authority to approve the work needed to resolve the situation. Can you help me out here?”

Sarah’s eyes flickered, and a brief look of relief crossed her face. She’d always felt awkward among the field volunteers, out of place in their boisterous camaraderie. “Of course, I’ll help. Just let me finish getting the food to the volunteers.”

“We got this, Sarah. You go deal with the emergency. We’ll save some food for you,” Evan reassured her, his voice full of understanding.

With a grateful nod, Sarah departed, leaving Katie, Evan, and Guido to distribute the lunch. Guido’s eyes sparkled mischievously as he addressed Katie, “Hey there, little lady. I don’t believe we’ve officially met.”

“You must be Guido.” Katie’s voice held amusement.

“Apparently, my reputation precedes me. You seem to know about me, but I know nothing about you. Let’s sit together at lunch and fix such a travesty of justice.”

“Um, I’m pretty sure my boyfriend would not approve,” Katie replied, finding Guido comical and harmless.

Guido wasn’t easily dissuaded. “Hmm, a boyfriend, you say. Is it serious?”

“Very serious,” Katie responded firmly, letting him know she was uninterested.

“If you two ever break up -” Guido began, only to be interrupted by Katie.

“Never gonna happen,” she said, waving her index finger from side to side.

Evan watched Guido wander off, a smirk playing on his lips. He turned to Katie, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Nicely done! You sent him packing in record time. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Guido give up so easily.”

Katie grinned, her eyes dancing with mischief. She playfully blew on her fingernails, curled her hand, and then rubbed her fingernails on her shirt, performing the theatrical expression with flair. “Well, someone has to keep him in check. Might as well be me,” she retorted, her voice laced with humor.

Evan laughed, appreciating her spirit. Together, they returned to the task at hand, their camaraderie strengthened by the shared moment of fun.

The trio carried the food to the tent area, their feet crunching over the open grassy field. The bright white canopy gleamed under the high midday sun, casting a cool shade beneath its shelter. The wooden surfaces of the picnic tables were adorned with cheerful red-checkered tablecloths that fluttered in the gentle breeze. A sense of camaraderie and hope was in the air.

As the aroma of sandwiches and chips mingled with the crisp fall air, Katie and Evan settled on either side of a new face--a young, 14-year-old volunteer named Diego. His presence had been an unexpected addition to the crew, the result of his own initiative. Evan saw a kindred spirit in the boy with a determination to make a difference.

Diego had a mop of unruly, dark hair that seemed to dance with every step he took. His expressive brown eyes carried a spark of curiosity and energy that was infectious. He had a wiry build, evidence of his youth and the active lifestyle he led. Dressed in faded jeans and a worn T-shirt adorned with a superhero emblem, he exuded an air of youthful determination and innocence.

Evan’s heart warmed at the sight of Diego, a sense of kinship blossoming within him. He had taken Diego under his wing earlier that morning, and their shared labor had been a bonding experience--a connection forged amidst the debris and the promise of renewal.

“Diego, this is Katie,” Evan introduced.

“Is she your girlfriend?” Diego asked, eyes wide.

“No, she’s my girlfriend’s good friend,” Evan answered, sharing a chuckle with Katie.

“Evan’s girlfriend is Sarah, the boss lady. Have you met her yet?” Katie added.

Diego shook his head, a grin spreading across his face as he chewed on his sandwich. Evan leaned closer to Katie, his eyes shining with admiration as he shared Diego’s story. “He was riding his bike, just cruising around the neighborhood, when he saw us all working here. Instead of passing by like most kids would, he decided to join in,” Evan explained, his voice filled with pride.

Katie’s eyes widened as she glanced at Diego, seeing him in a new light.

As Evan looked at Diego, something deeper stirred within him. He saw in Diego a reflection of his younger self, a mirror image of a similar family background with an absentee father and a mother struggling to make ends meet. This connection was unspoken yet understood between them.

Katie watched Evan’s face, touched by the connection he felt with Diego. Evan turned back to the young volunteer, his face breaking into a wide smile. “Can you believe that, Katie? His apartment building wasn’t even touched by the tornado. Yet here he is, spending his Saturday helping those who were not so fortunate, and he didn’t even have to be asked. Diego, you’re the man, dude!” Evan exclaimed, reaching over to high-five Diego.

Diego’s face lit up, his eyes sparkling with joy as he returned the gesture, clearly thrilled by Evan’s praise.

As they continued to chat, Diego’s liveliness and hunger for life (and sandwiches) filled Evan and Katie with warmth. The conversation flowed effortlessly, Diego’s tales of his mom, sisters, friends, and pet dog painting a vivid picture of his life.

Finally, it was time to return to work. “You ready to get back to work, Diego?” Evan asked.

“Sure thing, boss.” Diego’s voice was light, teasing.

They cleared the tables, and as Katie wandered off to find something to clean with, Evan’s mind drifted to thoughts of family, of Sarah, and of a future filled with love and purpose. Diego had touched something profound within him, igniting a spark that he knew would guide him forward. Diego felt like family, like the brother he never had, and in that moment, he saw the path he was meant to take, a path of giving, of connecting, of making a difference.

The seeds of a lifelong commitment to helping others had been planted in Evan’s heart, sparked by a chance encounter with a young teen and a shared desire to make a difference.

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**Scene #48: Time to relax and enjoy the sunset**

Evan and Diego leaned against an old tractor, Each holding an ice cold bottle of your in their hand. The aged tractor’s once vibrant color now lost beneath layers of rust and wear. The machinery, though still sturdy, bore the signs of many years of hard labor. Patches of faded red paint clung stubbornly to the metal, offering glimpses of its former glory, while the majority of the surface was overtaken by a rusty patina. Exposed gears and weathered levers hinted at a time when the tractor was a vital part of daily farm life. The large rubber tires were cracked and worn, and the seat was frayed, revealing the cushioning inside. Despite its dilapidated appearance, there was a sense of nostalgia and resilience about the tractor, as if it held within it the stories and memories of the fields it had once tended.

Evan and Diego, resting against the time-worn tractor, turned their gazes to the horizon, where the flatlands of central Illinois were bathed in the glow of a breathtaking sunset. The sky, a canvas of oranges, pinks, and purples, seemed to be on fire as the sun dipped lower, casting a serene and otherworldly light across the land.

Below this celestial masterpiece, however, lay a stark contrast. The ground was scarred and strewn with debris, a grim testament to the tornado’s wrath. Homes were reduced to rubble, trees uprooted, and fields laid waste. The juxtaposition was both haunting and beautiful, a poignant reminder of nature’s dual ability to both create and destroy.

As the two young men watched, the thought occurred to them that the same sky that now painted a picture of tranquility had, just days before, unleashed a fury capable of tearing a town apart. It was as if the heavens were offering an apology, a gentle caress to soothe the soul after a violent outburst. The beauty of the moment was not lost on them, and they sat in reflective silence, contemplating the fickle and awe-inspiring nature of the world, where beauty and devastation coexisted in a delicate and eternal dance.

Evan held his root beer bottle in the air to toast Diego’s bottle, a simple yet heartfelt gesture of gratitude for a job well done. “You did a great job out there today, Diego.”

Diego thanked him, and they clinked the bottlenecks of their bottles together in a toast. They enjoyed the moment in silent companionship, each lost in his own thoughts, reflecting on the shared experiences of the day.

The tranquillity was interrupted when Katie arrived, her face flushed from searching for them. “There you guys are. I’ve been looking all over the place.”

Evan’s eyes crinkled with a knowing smile. “What’s up?”

“I want to make sure Diego was safely on his way before it got too dark. Plus, I want Sarah to meet our unexpected, hard-working volunteer,” Katie replied, her voice carrying a hint of mystery and respect for the young volunteer.

“Come on, buddy. Finish your beer and throw it in the trash can,” Evan encouraged Diego, his voice tender and fatherly.

Katie’s laughter was light and genuine as she watched Evan and Diego simultaneously finish off their root beers and toss them in the nearby garbage can. She found their synchronicity endearing. Her heart swelled with affection at the sight of their burgeoning friendship, the sincere bond they had created in just one day.

As they walked side-by-side toward the Sarah’s office, the soft glow of the setting sun casting romantic shadows behind them, their laughter and conversation gently faded into the distance. The evening was left with a lingering sense of fulfillment, friendship, and the beautiful simplicity of human connection.

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**Scene #49: Evan Volunteers for Overtime**

As the sun neared its rest behind the endless farm fields, Sarah’s eyes caught the distant silhouette of three figures approaching the mobile office. The fading light cast long shadows, transforming the trio into mythical beings returning from some epic quest. Her heart fluttered as they drew closer, and she began to recognize their faces. Katie, Diego, and Evan, caked in the grime of a hard day’s work, wore the satisfying exhaustion of a job well done.

But her eyes lingered on Evan, and she couldn’t help but zoom in on him. The sun’s last golden rays caught the sweat on his brow, making him shine like a character from a romantic poem. He wore rugged boots, perfectly fitting jeans, a light-colored T-shirt she gave all the volunteers, and an unbuttoned flannel shirt. Every piece of clothing seemed to cling to him just right, emphasizing his muscular form. As dirty and sweaty as he was, this image stirred something deep within her.

Her heart raced as his eyes met hers, and she realized with a jolt that she’d never thought a man could look like that and be so sexy. The romantic feelings it invoked were potent, almost overwhelming, and she felt a blush creep up her cheeks as they approached.

The moment was pure magic, a snapshot in time when all the weariness of the day seemed to melt away, and all that was left was the connection between two people. The world fell away, and in that instant, it was just Sarah and Evan, two souls reaching out to each other across the space that separated them, bound by something far more profound than mere attraction. It was a moment she knew she’d remember forever, a testament to the inexplicable pull of love.

All she knew about Diego was that he had appeared as a volunteer that morning, shadowing Evan all day, the information conveyed to her by Katie. In her hands, she held an honorary T-shirt for Diego, bearing the nonprofit organization’s name, “Home Is Where the Heart Is,” a simple token of appreciation for his selfless effort.

Unknown to anyone, was that Sarah was apprehensive around children, particularly teens. Similar to the awkwardness she felt around people her own age, it was twice as awkward with children. But she was committed to doing her best when introduced to Diego.

Katie said, “Sarah, this is Diego. He did a great job today.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Diego. Thank you so much for helping out today. I have something for you.” Sarah held up the shirt, her voice carrying the elegance and grace that marked her character. Before giving it to Diego, she added, “All of our valued volunteers receive a free T-shirt.”

Diego received the shirt from Sarah and, being a polite young man, thanked her. However, he was interested in something other than the T-shirt. He turned to Evan. “That’s your girlfriend!?”

Evan’s smile was radiant, the smile of a man deeply in love. “Yep! She sure is.”

Diego’s eyes widened, “You done good!” He then raised his hand to high-five Evan for his choice of girlfriend.

The room was filled with laughter, a melody of joy that bound them all together. Sarah, Katie, and Evan laughed aloud at his remark. Sarah’s nerves were replaced with warmth as she engaged Diego. “I know it was hard work, but did you have fun out there today?”

“It was a blast!” Diego responded.

“I’m glad to hear it! What was the best part of the day?” Sarah’s eyes sparkled with genuine interest.

Katie chimed in, “It was hanging out with Evan, wasn’t it?”

“Nope. The best part of the day was lunch!” Diego’s comments had all three of them cracking up.

“Are you hungry?” Sarah asked, her voice tinged with motherly concern.

“I am starving.”

Sarah turned to Katie, her eyes filled with a mixture of kindness and understanding. “Katie, there’s plenty of leftovers from lunch today in the office. They are just going to go to waste. Sandwiches are in the fridge, drinks are in the cooler, and there’s still some snacks left in a bag.”

Diego’s eyes shone with a childlike excitement. Katie asked, “Would you like to grab some food before you go home, Diego?”

Diego was thinking, As if she had to ask. “Would I? Dang right I would.”

Evan whispered something in Sarah’s ear, his voice a soft caress, leading her to offer something to Diego. “We have so much food left over. Why don’t you take some home for your family?”

Diego’s reaction was pure, unbridled joy. “Really!? I ain’t gonna get busted for stealing?”

Sarah chuckled, her laugh a soothing melody. “Nope, you can have as much as you can carry.”

Diego pumped his fist in the air several times in celebration. “I am going to be the hero tonight!”

Katie smiled, a knowing glance passing between her and Sarah. “Let’s go. It’s getting dark.”

Evan’s voice was filled with warmth as he said, “Give me a final high-five before you head out.” The two high-fived each other, a gesture that marked the beginning of a friendship. Katie and Diego headed for the food. Before they got too far, Evan shouted, “I’ll see you tomorrow!” Diego nodded confirmation.

“You’re going to see him tomorrow?” The words left her lips, a question laden with curiosity and a touch of incredulity.

Evan’s earnest smile softened the rugged lines of his face, a testament to the transformation that had taken hold within him. “Yeah, I was talking to some volunteers,” he began, his voice carrying the warmth of newfound purpose. “They said they were part of the Sunday crew responsible for taking everything down and packing it up to be transported to the next site or back to headquarters. I asked if they needed help, and they said they could always use help. So Diego and I volunteered.”

Sarah’s heart swelled with a mixture of emotions—pride, admiration, and a growing sense of connection. Her voice held a hint of amazement as she inquired further, “What about your softball game?”

Evan’s gaze held hers, a silent affirmation of the decisions he had made. “They can live without me for one game.”

His answer left her momentarily speechless, a wave of emotions crashing over her. She watched him, the man she had known and cared for, evolve before her eyes, embracing a cause greater than himself. Her lips parted, as if to speak, but no words emerged. The magnitude of Evan’s transformation hummed in the air between them, a silent anthem of selflessness.

“One more thing, Sarah,” Evan’s voice carried a note of earnestness, punctuating the moment. “Guido and the gang are headed back in a few minutes to guzzle down their well-earned beer, but I wanted to stay another hour to finish cleaning out the barn. One of the guys said he would drive his car up and leave the headlights on so we could see what we were doing.”

Sarah’s heart swelled with a symphony of emotions—an affectionate warmth, a touch of surprise, and a burgeoning sense of longing. Evan’s dedication to the cause resonated deeply within her, stirring a mixture of emotions she couldn’t ignore.

Her emotions mingled like colors on a canvas, and she found herself reaching out, gently touching his arm. Her expression conveyed admiration, a heartfelt acknowledgment of the man he was becoming. “Evan,” she began, her voice soft but filled with genuine sincerity, “every time I think I’ve figured you out, you astonish me again. Giving up your Sunday, your friends, all for this cause, and for us... it’s amazing.”

Their gazes locked, a silent conversation that transcended words. In that moment, amid the backdrop of twilight, their connection felt timeless—an unspoken bond that defied the constraints of time and space.

Evan said. “I wish I weren’t so dirty, and we weren’t at your work. I want to kiss you so badly right now.”

Sarah’s heart quickened, the weight of their emotions surging to the surface. In the midst of the fading light, she found herself discarding inhibitions, embracing a choice that defied convention. With a soft smile, she gently placed her hands on either side of Evan’s face, a touch that spoke volumes.

“Screw it,” she whispered, her voice carrying the essence of their shared desires.

Their lips met in a kiss that defied the world around them, a testament to the journey they had undertaken. In that fleeting embrace, amidst the chill of a fall evening, their emotions converged—a shared sentiment that held the promise of something profound and uncharted.

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**Scene #50: Patti Confronts Evan about Sarah**

Under the soft afterglow of a fading sunset, Evan found himself lost in a tender moment with Sarah, their lips meeting in a gentle, lingering kiss. The world around them seemed to pause, save for a voice calling from a distance. It was Guido, impatiently nagging his friend, "Yo Evan. Come on, let's go. We have a fridge full of beer at home calling our names."

The voice was a mere ripple in Evan's contentment, a fond annoyance that nudged him back to reality. Reluctantly, he pulled back from Sarah's lips, their eyes meeting in mutual understanding.

"The Guido is beckoning you," Sarah said with a soft chuckle, her eyes filled with warmth and humor.

Evan's laughter mingled with hers, a shared moment of levity in their burgeoning love. "I suppose it's time to break the bad news."

"I'll leave you to it. Thank you again for sacrificing your softball game to help us out," Sarah said, her voice laced with appreciation.

"I'm happy to do it," Evan reassured her, his gaze holding hers as Guido's voice filtered through the background. "Meet you in your office in about an hour?"

Sarah agreed, gave Evan a quick kiss goodbye, and headed to the onsite mobile office. Her footsteps were light, and she turned back once, her eyes still shining with joy.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he called, annoyance briefly flaring at Guido's repeated shouting. But as he approached his friends, Evan's eyes were drawn to Patti. Her face, usually bright and animated, looked strained and stressed. Something was wrong, a hidden turmoil that tugged at Evan's heart.

As he neared, the unspoken question hung in the air, a cloud of uncertainty that hinted at challenges yet to come. The evening's chill seemed to creep in, and Evan felt a sudden, inexplicable shiver of apprehension.

With the exception of Patti, the group of friends let out a collective moan and groan as Evan broke the news.

"Sorry, guys. I'm gonna stay and work another hour or two and then head back with Sarah."

Guido, always the quick wit, added his own touch of humor, "Come on, guys. Let's leave Captain America alone to save the world."

The disappointed group dispersed, leaving only Roxanne and Patti behind. Roxanne exchanged some quiet words with Patti, a smirk tugging at her lips. Patti's demeanor was different; a mixture of determination and uncertainty as she turned to Evan.

"Patti," he greeted, his eyebrows raised in silent inquiry.

Patti hesitated, then took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "Evan, can we talk?"

Evan nodded, his curiosity piqued. "Sure, what's on your mind?"

Patti's gaze shifted nervously to the ground before meeting Evan's eyes. "It's about Sarah," she began carefully.

Evan's brow furrowed in confusion. "What about her?"

Patti hesitated again, her emotions warring within her. "Some of the guys are...concerned about your relationship with her," she admitted hesitantly.

Evan's irritation flared, his defenses rising. "What do you mean, concerned?"

Patti met his gaze directly, her voice earnest. "They're worried she's changing you, that you're skipping games and spending all your time with her. They think you're...losing yourself."

Evan's frustration surged, his tone growing sharper. "Are you kidding me? They have a problem with me being happy?"

Patti held up a placating hand. "Evan, it's not that simple. They care about you."

"Seems like they care more about their idea of who I should be," he retorted, his anger simmering beneath the surface.

Patti sighed, her eyes filled with empathy. "I know you care about her a lot, but Evan, you need to make sure you're not neglecting other things that matter to you."

Evan's jaw clenched, his emotions in turmoil. He took a deep breath, his anger slowly giving way to reflection. "Patti, I appreciate your concern, but this is my life, my choice."

Patti's expression softened, her concern genuine. "I know, Evan. I just don't want to see you hurt."

Evan's anger ebbed, replaced by a mix of emotions. He reached out, placing a hand on Patti's shoulder. "I know you're looking out for me, and I value that. But I need you to trust that I can make my own decisions."

Patti nodded, a small smile touching her lips. "Okay, Evan. Just remember, I'm here for you, no matter what."

Evan squeezed her shoulder in gratitude. "I know, Patti. And I'm grateful for that."

"Evan, I'm sorry for questioning your choice. It's not my place, and I trust you know what you're doing. I want you to know that I'll stand by you, and I'll talk to the rest of the group. I'll encourage them to support you and Sarah's relationship just as I will do from now on. We're friends, and friends support each other, no matter what." Her words were sincere, and Evan felt a weight lift off his shoulders as he thanked her. Patti's smile was warm as she headed back to her car, leaving Evan with a newfound sense of assurance and comfort.

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**Scene #51: Patti Updates Her Friends about Her Conversation with Evan**

The chill crept into the bones of the group as they gathered in the designated parking area for the volunteers, the cold and wind nipping at them as they waited for Patti. Darkness had fallen about an hour ago, leaving the air colder and the group ill-prepared in their sweat-soaked clothes.

Guido's impatience was undeniable. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, his eyes occasionally darting towards his car as if the fridge full of beers at home was a siren's call he couldn't resist. On the flip side, Guido shifted impatiently, rubbing his arms to generate warmth. "Those beers won't drink themselves," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

Roxanne sent him a sharp look, silencing him momentarily. Her face was a mask of concern and curiosity, all directed at Patti, who was now approaching them, her face etched with a mixture of resignation and determination.

Patti's friends, excluding Guido, waited with bated breath, their eyes glued to her as she came closer. They had seen the look in Evan's eyes, and now they were anxious to hear from Patti.

Patti hesitated, her eyes drifting past them for a moment as if focusing on something else, something beyond the present situation. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling, a shiver running through her body--not entirely from the cold.

He's in love with her, she thought, the words like a painful truth she had to accept. And I have to support him. Even if I feel he is making a huge mistake.

"Patti," Roxanne called out, her voice tight with concern. "What happened? What did Evan say?"

Patti cleared her throat, her voice cutting through the crisp evening air, "Hey guys, I spoke with Evan." The group's attention snapped to her, their eyes fixed on her as if waiting for a verdict.

"He wasn't exactly thrilled with what I had to say," Patti continued, her tone calm but tinged with a hint of resignation. "He's upset that his friends aren't supporting him." She looked at each of them in turn, her gaze steady, "But I told him that he's in love with Sarah and he's committed to her."

Guido rolled his eyes, his impatience evident. "Can we get this show on the road? It's getting cold out here."

Patti pressed on, undeterred by Guido's urgency. "I think it's important that we back Evan's choice, just like he would do for any of us. If this relationship ends up hurting him, then we should be there to support him." She paused, her gaze lingering on each friend, "I'm going to support him. It's the least we can do as his friends."

Roxanne's expression softened slightly, though her skepticism was still apparent. She nodded in agreement, her voice quiet but firm, "For Patti's sake, I'll bite my tongue around Sarah. I won't make things more difficult."

The rest of the group nodded in varying degrees of agreement, their initial concerns seemingly overshadowed by the realization that Evan was determined to be with Sarah. The tension that had hung in the air seemed to dissipate, replaced by a sense of acceptance.

With a nod, Patti concluded, "Alright, let's head home. It's getting colder, and I think we could all use some warmth." As the group began to disperse, Guido wasted no time in heading towards his car, his steps quick and purposeful.

He's with Sarah, for now anyway, she thought, the words a final acceptance of reality. It is what it is.

As Patti walked towards her own car, her mind was a whirlwind of emotions. She felt a sense of helplessness, unable to shake the feeling that Evan might eventually get his heart broken. A glimmer of hope still lingered, a faint dream that maybe, one day, they could explore a romantic relationship. But above all, she valued his friendship and resolved to stand by him, whatever the future held.

# Chapter 14: A Vaughn Family Christmas Eve

**Scene #52: The Road to Family and Uncertainties**

Late afternoon had settled into a gray, frigid embrace as Sarah's Audi Sedan sped north on I-57 Highway. Christmas melodies filled the car, the notes dancing in the air, intertwining with Evan's cheerful humming. Evan's eyes sparkled, mirroring the decorated houses that flashed by the window as he drove. He was in his element, surrounded by Christmas, his favorite holiday, and the woman he loved deeply, Sarah.

Beside him, Sarah worked with determination, her laptop keys tapping a staccato beat to a symphony of responsibilities. A long list of benefactors awaited her call. Two separate New Year's Eve parties begged for her attention. And yet, the pull of Evan's joy, the sweetness of his holiday spirit, tugged at her heart.

He sensed something was wrong, the happiness in his eyes overshadowed by concern. "Is everything alright?" he asked, his voice filled with genuine worry.

She looked up, a smile plastered on her face, but it didn't reach her eyes. "It’s just work – nothing to be worried about."

But he did worry, and as they continued to drive, the silence between them grew, filled with unspoken words and conflicting priorities. Evan reached over and gently squeezed her hand and reminded her, "You know, Sarah, you promised to leave work behind once we get to Liz's."

She looked up, meeting his eyes, and nodded silently. The sincerity in his eyes made her feel guilty, but she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that she was neglecting her duties. He loves Christmas so much, she thought, forcing a smile as Evan turned to her, his eyes filled with excitement. And I love him, so I'll make the best of this trip.

"Evan, tell me again about the movie you're keeping a secret?" she asked, attempting to engage in his excitement.

Evan's grin widened, and he winked. "Now, if I told you that, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it? Trust me, Sarah, you're going to love it!"

Sarah's smile strained slightly, her thoughts drifting back to her work. The cold, gray day outside seemed to echo her feelings. The excitement of the holiday season was lost on her as her responsibilities as an event coordinator weighed heavily. Marcus is depending on me. I have to get this right, she thought, her mind consumed by phone calls to make and parties to be planned.

They continued driving, Evan chattering about his sister Liz, her boyfriend Joe, and the traditions he cherished. Sarah listened half-heartedly, her mind drifting between Evan's words and the projects that awaited her.

Evan's enthusiasm remained undeterred. "I can't wait for you to meet Liz!" he said, his eyes bright. "And our surprise Christmas present. She is going to love it!"

Evan's grin widened. "Let's make a quick stop," he suggested. "We've got some time."

She hesitated for a moment. "Sure, why not," she said, offering him a small smile.

Evan took a detour to a neighborhood famous for holiday decorations. Reluctantly, Sarah closed her laptop and gazed out the window, feigning interest in the twinkling lights and festive ornaments. Evan pointed out the most elaborate displays as they drove through the illuminated streets. "Check out that house!" he exclaimed, his voice brimming with childlike wonder.

Sarah nodded, her gaze drifting from the decorations to Evan's face. They are beautiful, but there's so much to do, she thought, her mind betraying her attempt to enjoy the moment.

Finally, they arrived at Liz's apartment complex, the anticipation in Evan's eyes unmistakable. He practically leaped out of the car, his enthusiasm infectious as he grabbed their luggage and gifts.

Sarah lingered, the warmth of the car a stark contrast to the cold outside. Her mind was still on her laptop, her thoughts a whirlwind of tasks and expectations.

Evan leaned in for a loving kiss as they grabbed their luggage and gifts, but Sarah pulled away quickly, mumbling something about the cold. But It wasn't the cold weather or lack of affection that caused her detachment. It was her difficulty in letting go of her professional obligations and engaging wholeheartedly in the moment with Evan. Her heart ached with a mix of longing and frustration.

Confusion flickered in Evan’s eyes when Sarah pulled back, his worry building. "Are you okay, Sarah?" he asked, his voice tinged with concern. "You seem a bit off."

She glanced away, her mind a whirl of thoughts. Work. Love. Time with Evan. Why can't I balance it all?

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, but her voice lacked conviction.

Evan's brows furrowed, and he took her hand, his touch gentle and caring. "Are you nervous about meeting Liz?" he asked, his eyes searching her face.

The question snapped Sarah out of her work mode, pulling her back to the present. She looked into Evan's eyes, filled with genuine concern, and realized how significant this moment was for him. A wave of understanding washed over her.

"No, Evan, I'm not nervous at all," she said with a gentle smile. "I was just... my mind was elsewhere for a moment. But I'm here now. Sorry about that. I'm excited to meet Liz and her boyfriend. I promise to break from thinking about work."

Evan's face softened, and his smile returned, though a hint of uncertainty lingered. "I just want you to enjoy this trip with me. Liz is going to love you."

Sarah squeezed his hand, her eyes filled with sincerity. "I'm already enjoying it, and I'm sure I'll love Liz too."

They stood at Liz's door, a hint of concern still visible in Evan's eyes. Now present and engaged in the moment, Sarah recognized that her words alone wouldn't be enough. Evan needed something tangible, a sign that she was indeed with him. With a soft smile, she leaned in and gave him the gentle, loving kiss he had expected earlier.

The concern in Evan's eyes melted away, replaced by a warmth that reassured Sarah she'd done the right thing. Now, all was right in Evan's world. Hand in hand, they turned to face the door, ready to knock and begin a new chapter in their shared journey.

Sarah was about to knock when a frightening thought popped into her head. She turned to Evan, her expression dead serious. "Am I going to have to wear an ugly Christmas sweater?"

Evan's laughter erupted, a hearty sound that could have rivaled even Santa's. He grinned at her, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "You have nothing to worry about. I wouldn't be caught dead in one of those things," he declared, his voice a mix of seriousness and amusement.

Sarah's tense shoulders relaxed, and she let out a slow, almost imperceptible exhale. Her eyes softened, and a small, genuine smile tugged at the corners of her lips. With relief evident in her entire being, she murmured, "Thank God!"

With her heart still settling from her manic moment, the amusement in Evan's eyes was contagious, and Sarah found herself amused by her own overblown fear. "I can't believe I freaked out over something as ridiculous as an ugly Christmas sweater," she said to Evan, her voice tinged with self-mockery. Sarah was relieved and ready to meet Liz, her anxiety replaced with anticipation. That was, until the door opened before she even had the chance to knock.

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**Scene #53: The Anticipation in Liz's Kitchen**

The melodies of Christmas songs swirled through the air, wrapping the room in a festive ambiance. Liz relished this atmosphere—the candles glowing softly, the scent of nutmeg and cinnamon mixing with that of the turkey roasting on the balcony. She had always been the hostess at heart, whether it was for large soirees or intimate family gatherings like this one. Rinsing vegetables at the sink, her heart swelled at the sight of the family photos placed around the room.

Just as she started to slice the carrots, a warm presence enveloped her from behind. Joe’s arms encircled her waist as he planted a soft kiss on the nape of her neck. “Did I ever tell you you’re the most beautiful woman in the world?”

She leaned back into his embrace. “You have, plenty of times. But it’s a melody my heart never tires of.”

“Can I have a kiss?”

Liz turned, her eyes narrowing playfully. “Will you tell me who our mystery guest is tonight?”

He grinned. “You’ll have to wait like everyone else.”

“Then you’ll have to wait for your kiss.”

Smiling, she pecked him on the tip of his nose before spinning back to her culinary duties. As if unwilling to let the moment end, Joe reached out, tickling her sides until she laughed, turning back toward him. His eyes sparkled as they met hers, the same playful glint mirrored in both. “All right, one quick one.”

Her lips met his briefly, yet the connection was electric, lighting up the room more than any holiday decor could.

“How’s the turkey coming along?” Liz asked, suddenly recalling their individual cooking responsibilities.

Joe’s gaze shifted toward the balcony. “Should be ready in about an hour. I thought Evan would’ve been here by now. Any news?”

She fished her phone from her pocket, swiping through to show him a series of pictures. “Evan and Sarah took a detour to Candy Cane Lane. Said they’ll be here in fifteen minutes.”

Sarah had work to do, she gave Joe a choice. “Either grab a knife and help me chop these vegetables, or go back to your turkey and basketball game.”

He smirked and snatched a carrot from the chopping board on his way out, provoking a playful slap on his hand. As he walked away, she couldn’t help but smile. Somewhere between the roasting turkey and the carrot thefts, amidst the laughter and teasing, she felt a sense of completeness that only the holiday season brought.

Liz admired her double oven range. The culinary marvel represented a synthesis of her and Joe’s love for cooking. A birthday gift from Joe, it had a dual-oven design that added functionality as well as flair to their cozy apartment kitchen. As she opened the lower oven to check on the green bean casserole, her gaze fixed on the stove. Green bean casserole - check. Rolls ready to bake 15 minutes before dinner - check. Potatoes on a light boil ready to be mashed - check. Salad ready to go - check. Apple pie cooling down - check.

She opened the freezer. Ice cream to go with the apple pie - check. Satisfied, she allowed herself a moment to relax. Once Joe tells me the turkey is resting, it’s go time.

Moving into the living room, she admired the comforting space. Framed photos adorned the walls, potted plants added a touch of green, and an oversized couch faced a large flat-screen TV. Joe was already there, engrossed in a basketball game. She nestled next to him on the sofa, her head finding its usual spot on his barrel-sized chest. A comfortable silence surrounded them, only broken by the sound of dribbling and cheering from the television.

“What you thinking about, hon?”

“I’m thinking about what it might mean that this is the first girl that Evan has ever brought home for the holidays.”

“He brought Patti last year for Thanksgiving.”

“True. But he didn’t bring her for Christmas.”

“Maybe she went home for the Christmas break?”

“Maybe. Don’t get me wrong, I loved Patti. I think she and Evan made a great match. But they didn’t have that spark. I think Evan needs to feel that spark inside like you and I have for each other.”

Joe tightened his grip around her, a silent affirmation of their shared love.

“Do you think he has that with Sarah?”

“I know he does. You should hear the way he talks about her. He was calling her ‘the one’ before he even knew her name. I suppose that causes me a little bit of worry.”

“I wouldn’t worry. I’m sure she’s going to be great. Even though Evan hasn’t been too serious before, all his girlfriends have been great!”

Liz lifted her head from Joe’s chest and ambled over to the gallery wall. A tapestry of cherished memories met her gaze: family holidays, their first date, Evan’s college graduation. Each frame told a story, every smile held an unspoken promise.

“I have a feeling we are going to be making a lot of new memories this Christmas.”

Joe’s eyes met hers with a mysterious smile. It was an expression Liz had seen before but couldn’t decipher. “I’m sure you’re right. I wonder if Sarah will get her picture up on our family gallery.”

“If she feels for Evan, like he told me he feels for her, then she’ll make it up on the wall.”

Liz sank back into the couch, her mind a whirlwind of emotions and expectations. Sarah and Evan. Evan and Sarah. She let the names roll around in her thoughts, pondering what the next three days—what the future—might hold for her brother and the mysterious woman he’d so passionately spoken of.

And so, in that warm apartment, with the fragrance of cooking and the cheer of Christmas around them, they both sat, thinking about what lay ahead. Each harbored a secret anticipation for the coming days, one more sure than the other, yet both hopeful that this Christmas would indeed be a time of joyous new beginnings.

Hearing voices outside but no knock, Liz turned her gaze away from the family gallery wall and sauntered over to the front door of their cozy apartment. She pressed her ear against the door’s smooth surface, the scent of the fresh pine wreath hanging outside filling her senses.

They’re here, she thought, her heart swelling with excitement and a sprinkle of curiosity.

A wave of her hand summoned Joe, who set aside the remote and got up from the couch. His basketball game was momentarily forgotten. He approached Liz, a curious smile forming on his lips, which were often the starting point of his full-faced grins.

“What’s going on?” he whispered, looking every bit as excited as Liz felt.

Sarah just called ugly Christmas sweaters ridiculous, she thought before whispering it to Joe, the words dancing in the air between them.

Joe’s eyes twinkled like the Christmas lights framing the living room window. He chuckled, his deep laughter vibrating in his chest.

Liz leaned in closer. “Shall we give her a proper initiation into our family?” Her eyes, usually calm and warm, held a glint of mischief.

The broad smile on Joe’s face, one that reached up to touch his hazel eyes, communicated more than words ever could. He was all in.

“On the count of three,” Liz whispered, the anticipation bubbling within her. “One... Two... Three.”

With a dramatic flourish, Liz’s hand twisted the doorknob, and she swung the door open so fast it was as if she’d let in a burst of winter air, potent and refreshing. The door’s movement seemed to echo her own heartbeat—swift, expectant, and full of life.

And so, the door flew open, its action a silent yet resonant exclamation point to the chapter that was about to unfold in their lives.

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**Scene #54: First Impressions and Ugly Sweaters**

The door swung open just as Sarah's knuckles were poised to tap against the wood. Her eyes landed on Liz, who stood in the doorway clad in an eye-wateringly garish Christmas sweater—complete with twinkling LED lights and a reindeer whose nose blinked red.

"So ugly Christmas sweaters are ridiculous, are they?" Liz's voice dripped with feigned indignation. Joe stood to her right, arms crossed over his chest, throwing Sarah a theatrical scowl.

Oh God. She heard me. Why did I say that out loud? A wave of hot shame washed over Sarah. Her heart pounded in her ears, each beat echoing her own idiocy. First impressions don't get do-overs, you know. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

Evan burst into laughter, breaking the tense moment. Sarah looked at him like he'd lost his mind. A second later, Joe and Liz joined him, their laughter warm and genuine.

"We're just teasing you, honey. I know the Christmas sweaters are ridiculous. That's the fun of wearing them!" Liz's face transformed into a comforting smile as she stepped forward and wrapped Sarah in a welcoming hug. "Welcome to our family!"

Sarah let out a deep, almost shaky sigh of relief. Okay, it was a joke. Just a joke.

"Oh my God. You scared the heck out of me. I thought I blew it before we even had a chance to meet," Sarah admitted, relief coloring her words.

"Don't sweat it," Joe chimed in, moving to give Sarah a bear hug. "It means you're already considered part of the family. Evan and Liz got me the same way when I first met them. You better get used to it; these two love to have fun."

Sarah couldn't say she found the fun in it just yet, but there was something deeply endearing about the swiftness with which she was considered family.

"Oh honey, you could never blow it with us. We're a pretty easy-going group around here. Come out of the cold, you two," Liz insisted.

In the moments that followed, Sarah felt the tension dissipate entirely. Liz and Joe introduced themselves more formally and inquired about their drive from Champaign. After a bit of light chatter about a detour down Candy Cane Lane, Liz directed Joe to carry Sarah and Evan's bags into the guest bedroom.

Sarah's heartbeat finally normalized, her relief settling like a soft blanket around her. She hadn't blown it. And oddly enough, she felt more welcomed than she'd thought possible.

Joe's voice echoed down the hall, signaling a 30-minute countdown to dinner. As he disappeared into the guestroom with their bags, Sarah thought, 30 minutes. Great. Okay, if I sit down now, I can reply to at least twenty emails and maybe clear some texts. Just a quick check-in, then I'll be back to vacation mode.

“Liz, would it be okay if I changed and freshen up before dinner?” She tried to sound as casual as possible, praying her face didn't betray her true intent. “I worked all morning and I didn't have time to change.”

“Of course it's okay. There's no rush, still about half an hour. Take your time.”

Ah, perfect, Sarah thought, though a flicker of curiosity passed through her when she saw Liz's knowing glance at Evan.

“The guest bedroom is at the end of the hallway to your right, and the bathroom is right across the hallway from the guest bedroom.”

“Great, thank you! I wanted to touch up my makeup before dinner.” Yes, another couple of minutes bought. More time for emails.

Sarah could feel a buoyant energy bubbling within her. It was as if she'd scored an unexpected victory, though one that flirted dangerously with betrayal.

As she walked down the hallway, her phone buzzed in her purse—a calendar reminder for a Zoom meeting she had purposefully ignored when setting her out-of-office. She should've felt guilty; after all, she'd promised Evan and herself a work-free weekend.

But it's only half an hour, she justified, half an hour and then three whole days of undivided attention.

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**Scene #55: Liz's Heart-to-Heart with Evan**

With Christmas carols humming softly from a corner speaker, Evan moved gracefully around the dining table, aligning the silverware just so. Liz, his sister, stood a few steps away, effortlessly mashing potatoes as if she were born to do it. Their synchrony was a dance they had mastered over years of hosting together, a unique rhythm in their relationship that required no instruction or confirmation. As siblings, they navigated an unusual space--sometimes Liz was the mother figure, often the mentor, and at other times they were as playful as any brother and sister.

As Evan adjusted a last spoon, his eyes darted toward the end of the hallway where Sarah had disappeared minutes earlier. Liz seemed to read his thoughts.

"She is quite beautiful. That skirt suit was fabulous. I'm afraid to even ask how much that cost," Liz said, pausing her culinary work for a moment.

"I haven’t met him yet, but her father is a self-made millionaire. He taught Sarah everything he knows about running a successful business. Sarah doesn’t really care one way or another about the designer clothes that she owns," Evan replied, a slight edge of defensiveness in his voice.

"For someone who doesn't care, she has great taste," Liz interjected, still awed by Sarah's appearance.

She definitely appreciates the nice clothes, and you're right, she has spectacular taste. Her apartment is to die for. But the reason everything is designer is her father's choice. He insists she buy those clothes because, in his opinion, walking into a meeting of any kind wearing a suit that costs over a thousand dollars with expensive shoes to match garners immediate respect without a word needing to be said."

Liz nodded, understanding instantly. "A well-dressed man, or in Sarah’s case, woman, does seem to be treated with more respect the better dressed they are."

She gets it, Evan thought, relieved. "I’m glad you can see that in her. She in no way considers herself superior to anyone. Unfortunately, because she's so smart--literally a genius--sometimes people think she looks down upon them. They don’t understand her like I do."

Liz's eyes met Evan's. She felt a swell of pride; her brother was growing, maturing. "Tell me more?"

Evan's voice quivered with emotion. "Every week, at least once, we work together to improve my grades. And these volunteer events--Oh my God, Liz. I had no idea how good it would feel to lend my time to a good cause. She's just so wonderful. I wouldn't be me if it weren't for Sarah."

Before Liz could speak, Joe's voice boomed from the patio, announcing that dinner would be ready in ten minutes.

"I'm so proud of you, and I’m looking forward to getting to know Sarah. You probably should go fetch her; dinner is almost ready," Liz suggested.

Evan frowned. "Nah. Sarah is never late for anything; she'll be out in time."

Concern tinged Liz's voice. "What's the matter? Is there trouble between you two?"

Evan sighed. "Sarah can be a bit of a workaholic. It never takes her almost half an hour to 'freshen up'. I am sure she is in there working on her laptop or replying to emails from her phone. She finds it difficult to relax when work needs to be done."

"Don’t worry, we’ll loosen her up a bit this trip," Liz reassured, her voice full of optimism. "Who doesn’t have fun at a Vaughn family get-together?"

Evan laughed. "Everyone has fun at our family get-togethers."

"So turn that frown upside down. It's Christmas with the Vaughn's," Liz playfully commanded, but her eyes betrayed her curiosity. "Joe's been driving me crazy. I can't believe he won't tell me who our mystery guest is tonight. Has he said anything to you?"

"Not a word. I have no idea who it is," Evan said, his words thick with intrigue.

As Evan spoke, Liz glanced at the hallway again, half expecting Sarah to emerge. But the mystery of the evening was just beginning, and she felt a tingling sense of anticipation.

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**Scene #56: Sarah Did a Bad Thing**

When she entered the guestroom, her eyes darted to the laptop bag resting on the bed. It lay there like a treasure chest, full of secrets, demands, and the thrill of the next project. Her phone buzzed again, almost as if urging her to defy the pact she’d made with Evan.

It’s not like he’s going to know, a voice in her mind whispered, taunting her. Just a few emails, a couple of texts. No harm done.

Sarah unpacked her clothes and changed into a cozy, dinner-appropriate outfit. All the while, her phone kept buzzing, as if chiding her for neglecting it. She clenched her fists, her eyes falling on her laptop bag again.

Come on, just open it. What could happen? Evan wouldn’t even need to know. And you— you’d feel so much better.

Finally, her resistance crumbled. Grabbing her phone, she darted into the bathroom and sat on the toilet lid. Rapidly, her thumbs danced over the screen, replying to one email, then another, and another. Each sent message seemed to tighten a noose of guilt around her heart.

What am I doing? Sitting on a toilet on Christmas Eve, secretly working? This is pathetic.

The humiliation washed over her, sharp and poignant. Her eyes found her reflection in the bathroom mirror—flushed cheeks, disheveled hair. She looked like someone running from something, and in that moment, it hit her: she was running, not from a physical danger, but from the possibility of disappointing Evan, of failing in the most fundamental aspects of being present in a relationship.

Grimacing, Sarah turned off her phone and put it back in her purse. Enough. No more sneaking, no more lies, even if they’re just to myself.

She reapplied her makeup, actually freshening up this time. By the time she stepped out of the bathroom and back into the guestroom, she felt different—more grounded, as if she’d cast away a cumbersome weight. For the first time that evening, she felt ready to truly be there, not just in body but in spirit, for Evan and his family.

The sharp pang of guilt still nagged at her, but it was quieter now, dwarfed by the louder voice of her newfound resolve. She wasn’t sure how long this victory over her work addiction would last, but for now, it was enough. It was a start.

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**Scene #57: Sarah's Path to Redemption**

Sarah turned off her phone with a heavy sigh and placed it inside her purse, which she then zipped up and hid away in the corner closet. It has to be out of sight, she thought, sinking onto her bed, or else I’ll be tempted to break my promise again.

How could I work when I said I wouldn’t? She replayed the moment in her mind--replying to emails and texts, all while Evan and his family were in the other room. She felt humiliated. Her father’s words echoed in her mind: “Without your integrity, you’re nothing.” And in that moment, Sarah felt like exactly that--nothing.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d betrayed her own principles. There would be no repercussions; no one would know. But that’s not the point, she admonished herself. I would know. Sarah realized that her only path to redemption was confessing to Evan, and Liz too.

Taking a fortifying breath, Sarah opened the door and stepped out. She moved down the hallway, her heart pounding louder with each step, and stopped when she saw Evan and Liz engrossed in a cheerful conversation. Her entrance disrupted their chat. She approached Evan, her head bowed and stopped just in front of him.

“I did a bad thing,” Sarah murmured, her voice tinged with childlike vulnerability.

Evan and Liz exchanged a knowing glance, smiling at her sincerity.

“You did? What bad did you do?” Evan asked, his tone gentle.

“I replied to many emails and texts,” she lifted her eyes to meet his. “I’m so sorry. Will you please forgive me?”

His eyes softened. “I forgive you.”

“You do?” Relief washed over her.

“You’re doing work for a good cause, Sarah. It matters to the people you help, and it matters to me,” Evan reassured her.

Overwhelmed, Sarah threw her arms around him. “You’re amazing. I love you so much!”

Just then, Joe’s voice boomed from the balcony, needing help with the turkey. “We’ll work out the details tomorrow,” Evan said. “But for tonight, can we agree to no work unless it’s an emergency?”

“Of course, we can agree,” Sarah beamed, watching Evan leave to assist Joe.

Left alone with Liz, she suddenly remembered her snide comment about ugly Christmas sweaters. “I haven’t made a very good first impression, have I?”

“What matters most,” Liz said, lifting Sarah’s chin tenderly, “is that you told Evan you loved him. And it was clear that you meant it. Right now, I consider you a member of our family.”

Sarah hugged Liz, the warmth of acceptance filling her. She’d felt many things since she’d come here, but now she felt something new and vital--she felt loved. I’m part of something bigger, she thought, her heart swelling, and it’s beautiful.

# Chapter 15: The Enigmatic Arrival

**Scene #58: Guessing the Mystery Guest**

At the heart of the warm, inviting dining room was a large wooden table, surrounded by six chairs. Sarah sat next to Evan, who was to her right. Across from Evan, another chair sat empty, but with no place setting to suggest it would be filled. At the opposite ends of the table, Liz was closest to Sarah while Joe sat near Evan. Directly across from Sarah, an empty chair awaited the arrival of a mystery guest. So we’ll be five, Sarah surmised, quickly calculating the seating arrangement in her mind.

Like clockwork, the trio set into motion. With the turkey ready to be carved, Evan, Sarah, and Joe flowed through the small kitchen with a graceful efficiency. Sarah was amazed at how they navigated the space without a single collision. There was no dialogue, no verbal cues, yet everyone seemed to know their tasks by heart.

Joe was the first to break away, carving knife and large fork in hand, as Evan and Sarah carried bowls of sides to the table. Salad was portioned, wine was poured, and soon enough, Evan and Liz were seated. Joe continued to slice the turkey, and Liz began distributing the carved pieces.

Evan grabbed the bowl of mashed potatoes and passed it to Sarah, who in turn handed it to Liz. Joe’s plate was filled last, by Liz, while he focused on carving enough turkey for everyone to have at least two servings. He then tucked the turkey into the oven, set on low, to ensure that their late-arriving guest would enjoy a warm meal

After the raw, heartfelt bonding moment she shared with Liz moments ago, something shifted within Sarah almost imperceptibly. It was as if an internal switch had been flicked, automatically activating her years of etiquette training. Her spine stiffened, movements became deliberate, a veneer of politeness settling over her like a well-tailored coat. Composure, poise, always polite, whispered the voices of countless etiquette lessons. It was a quick, almost reflexive retreat into her more familiar, rigid self, a sanctuary built over years to ward off vulnerability. She looked on at Evan’s family’s warm interactions and, for a moment, realized how much effort it took to defy her own ingrained instincts.

As everyone began to eat, Joe’s phone buzzed. “Our mystery guest will be here soon,” he announced, smiling as he put the phone down. “Any guesses?”

Liz touched her chin thoughtfully. “Hmm. I honestly have no idea. Did you meet some famous Chicago bear player on some remodel of his home?”

“Nope! Better than that,” Joe grinned.

Evan looked shocked. “Better than a Chicago bear joining us for Christmas Eve dinner!? Did you meet my favorite Chicago Cubs pitcher, Lefty Loogan? You would be my hero for life if you invited him for dinner.”

Joe reveled in the suspense. “Nope! You’re gonna like this guest even better than Lefty Loogan.”

Evan’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “Wait a minute. I know who it is. It’s Liz’s favorite actor Harvey Hunksman.”

Liz threw a dinner roll at Evan, feigning indignation. “I don’t have a favorite actor. But if I did it certainly wouldn’t be anyone named Harvey Hunksman.”

Evan caught the roll effortlessly and took a bite, grinning. Sarah watched the spectacle, initially horrified at the casual food warfare. But their genuine joy quickly dissipated her discomfort. She found herself leaning into the scene, no longer wishing to escape it.

Oh my, how I have changed, she mused.

Joe, sensing Sarah’s hesitance, sought to include her. “I know you’re new here, but do you have any guesses?”

“I don’t really know many people that the three of you collectively know,” Sarah replied softly.

Joe laughed. “That’s ok. Your guesses can't be any worse than these clowns.”

Evan threw a roll back at Joe, mimicking the earlier exchange between him and Liz. Sarah leaned in, whispering to Evan, “You don’t think it’s Guido, do you?”

“No, I’m sure it’s not Guido; he’s in Philadelphia,” Evan chuckled, causing Liz and Joe to join in the laughter.

Sarah felt a wave of relief, just as a knock on the door refocused everyone’s attention. Joe was visibly proud of his secret as he walked to the door, instructing everyone to stay seated. With an air of dramatic flair, he opened the door but strategically positioned his body to block the view.

Sarah felt a surge of anticipation. Her heartbeat quickened, and she realized she was now emotionally invested in the mystery.

Finally, Joe stepped aside, revealing the long-awaited guest.

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**Scene #59: Revealing the Mystery Guest**

Sarah was surprised at how vested she was in this mystery reveal without even knowing who had walked through the door. She found herself rising from her seat, performing a miniature hand clap, her eyes wide with infectious joy. Liz and Evan, in an uncanny display of sibling synchrony, had sprung from their chairs screaming, “It’s Mom, it’s Mom!” The force of their twin hug could have knocked their mother to the ground. Instead, it merely nudged her back a few steps, their love serving as a sturdy anchor. Joe stood off to the side, his face a portrait of pride and satisfaction.

Sarah remained standing, her hands still clapping softly. She couldn’t help but get swept up in the tidal wave of raw emotion that was filling the room. Though she didn’t share their history, she was touched by their undeniable love for each other.

Evan was thrilled, his eyes twinkling, yet more composed than his sister. His mother was fighting back tears, her eyes moist with joy and surprise.

After several heartwarming minutes of embraces and cheek-kissing, Bridget turned to Joe, wrapping him in a hug and pecking his cheek in gratitude. Evan joined in, their manly handshake transforming into a one-armed hug. Liz caught Joe’s eyes, her gaze filled with immense love and gratitude. Their shared hug and soft kiss seemed to wrap up a perfectly orchestrated surprise.

Evan beckoned Sarah closer. “This is Sarah. The woman I’m madly in love with. Sarah, this is my mom, Bridget!”

He just told his mom he’s madly in love with me, Sarah thought. The words, so simple and direct, made her feel both exposed and comforted, as though Evan had peeled away one more layer of her reserved exterior.

As Sarah extended her hand for a polite handshake, Bridget chuckled softly, joined by others in the room. “Oh, dear. This family doesn’t greet our loved ones with handshakes. We are a family of huggers.”

Sarah felt a warm embrace envelop her. It felt welcoming, familiar, like something she’d been missing without knowing it.

“Let’s all sit down and finish our meals, I can’t wait to hear how you two pulled this off,” Evan said, directing his mom toward her seat. “Have a seat, Mom. I’ll heat you up some food.”

“Nonsense. You sit down next to your lovely girlfriend; I can serve myself,” Bridget countered, taking control of the kitchen as if she’d lived there for years.

Sarah felt a surge of warmth envelop her. What is happening to me? Before she knew it, she’d reached for Liz and Evan’s hands, squeezing them tightly. “I’m so happy for you.”

Joe and Bridget went on to explain how they’d orchestrated the whole surprise. The plan was based on cunningly false information about the cruise dates. Bridget could only stay until Christmas evening, needing to catch her real cruise. Throughout this explanation, Sarah sensed that Joe might have something else up his sleeve, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

As the evening progressed, Bridget turned her gaze towards Sarah, eyes filled with the wisdom and scrutiny only a mother could have. “So, this is ‘the one–’”

Liz shot her mother a look. Sarah was yet unaware of Evan’s nickname for her. Bridget seamlessly adjusted her wording. “–the one I’ve been hearing about so much lately.”

“I suppose that would be me,” Sarah replied, a slight smile forming on her lips.

“Madly in love, you say?” Bridget turned towards Evan.

“Madly, in love,” Evan emphasized, sealing his words with an impassioned look.

Right to the point, this family, Sarah thought. And yet, answering didn’t feel like stepping onto a landmine; it felt like stepping into light. “How could I not be? To answer your question, I am madly in love with your son.”

Touched by her open vulnerability, Liz brought her hands to her heart. Evan leaned over and kissed Sarah softly on her lips.

Satisfied, Bridget returned to her meal, her gaze lingering just a moment longer on Sarah before she took a sip of her wine. And as if on cue, everyone else returned to their meals, an unspoken agreement that they were, in that moment, a complete family.

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**Scene #60: Delving into Evan's Energy Drops**

While Sarah chatted with Bridget, Liz observed her. Something about Sarah hadn’t changed since dinner began. Is it the way she sits? Liz thought. She decided to ask.

"I gotta tell you, Sarah. You have the most perfect posture I've ever seen in my life. What's your secret?" Liz asked, her tone tinged with genuine curiosity.

Sarah looked up, momentarily surprised but visibly flattered. "Years of practice. My father even enlisted a tutor to instruct me in the finer points of posture, among other etiquette lessons."

Liz chuckled. "I wish you would tutor my brother on his posture--Mr. Slouchy Slouch."

"I don't think he has the patience for it."

Laughter rippled through the table of women, each nodding in agreement. Evan, overhearing his name, simply rolled his eyes. But then Liz's demeanor changed. Her eyes shifted to Evan, narrowing with concern. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something about Evan's casual slouch triggered a deeper worry she had for him.

"What about your energy drop issues, Evan? Has there been any improvement?" Liz inquired, her voice shifting from playful to authoritative.

Evan's mom, Bridget, tensed a little, waiting for her son's answer.

"Come on Liz, I've told you a hundred times, I'm fine. My employer requires that I get a physical every six months. I have another one coming up after the new year," Evan replied, visibly irritated.

Bridget chimed in. "How thorough are those physicals, Evan? Do they do blood work?"

Evan stood up abruptly, a flare of annoyance crossing his features. He carried his plate to the sink, rinsing it off before placing it in the dishwasher, perhaps hoping to redirect the conversation. "They're thorough enough, Mom. You think the fitness club would let me work there if I had even a hint of an issue? I rarely get those anymore."

Liz wasn't convinced. Rarely according to Evan could mean something entirely different to me, she thought. "Sarah, have you seen Evan experience energy walls?"

"Energy walls?" Sarah looked thoughtful. "Evan has more energy than any human being I've ever met. It's a constant struggle to get him to sit down for an hour while we're studying."

Evan beamed. Finally, someone on my side.

Sarah continued, "Honestly, I don’t know how he does it."

"See, Liz. I told you I’m fine. Sarah would know better than anybody," Evan boasted, a triumphant grin spreading across his face.

Sarah hesitated, her eyes meeting Liz's. "But, you know, Liz. Now that you mention it, there have been a couple of times when Evan's energy seemed to fall off a cliff."

Liz gave Evan a knowing glance. "Let me guess, he tells you that he just overdid it and that it happens to all personal trainers?"

Sarah's eyes widened. "That’s exactly what he says!"

Bridget nodded, her eyes narrowing slightly as she spoke. "Evan has been grappling with these episodes of energy loss since he was a child. I highly doubt the same can be said for his colleagues."

Evan was quick to defend himself. "Yes, and when you took me to the doctor, they said nothing was wrong. They did blood work, and it all came up negative for anything serious. They sent us home with iron pills."

"Whenever I overdo it, I always take a couple of days off, eat right on those days, and I’m good as new in no time. Isn’t that right, Sarah?"

Sarah nodded. "That is true. That's why I've never worried about it before."

"So, you see, it's not a problem," Evan concluded, eager to lay the subject to rest. "Sarah will keep an eye on me, and you'll be the first ones she contacts if she has any concerns."

He turned his gaze toward Sarah. "Is that a fair statement, Sarah?"

Sarah nodded her agreement, seemingly putting everyone's concerns at ease--for the moment, at least.

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**Scene #61: The Allure of Sarah's Pendant**

Evan caught Joe’s eye and seized the moment to lighten the atmosphere. “You’ve been awfully quiet, Joe. I think it’s your turn to get some attention. How about we all interrogate you for a while!”

Joe leapt to his feet, a grin stretching across his face. “Gotta go finish carving the turkey for leftovers tomorrow!”

Laughter filled the room, washing away any lingering tension and replacing it with the warm glow of holiday cheer.

“I noticed you rubbing that cute little pendant. I’ve never seen anything like that before. Is it some worry-stone-like charm?” Bridget’s eyes twinkled as she addressed Sarah.

Liz chimed in, “I also noticed you rubbing it earlier. It is adorable!”

Sarah’s gaze swung toward Evan. “You didn’t tell them about my pendant?”

Evan shifted in his seat, averting his eyes. “Ah, it’s no big deal.”

“Don’t be embarrassed for buying your girlfriend such a cute gift, Evan.” Bridget’s tone was tender.

Sarah’s lips parted before she even had time to think. “He didn’t exactly buy it.”

Joe, happy the focus remained on Evan and not him, chuckled. “What did you do, Evan? Steal it?”

Evan shot him a wry smile. “You’re a regular stand-up comedian, Joe. Maybe you should take your act on the road.”

Joe smirked back, clearly enjoying the banter. “Don’t tempt me.”

Liz cut in, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger as she did when she was intrigued. “Quiet, you two! What do you mean, Sarah, when you say Evan didn’t exactly buy it?”

Sarah felt the room’s attention pivot back to her. She met Liz’s gaze, and a warmth flushed over her, making her feel like she was sitting in the coziest corner of a family home she never knew she had missed.

Sarah glanced at Evan and sensed an unfamiliar awkwardness shrouding him. Is he embarrassed? Or just modest? She decided to take the plunge. “May I share our story?”

Evan met the expectant gazes of his mother and sister. “Go ahead. I’m sure I’d be disowned if I said no.”

As Sarah recounted the tale of her pendant, something uncharacteristic happened: her voice warmed, her face lit up, and her gestures animated the air around her. In her classroom, she might be stiff and monotone, but here, her words dripped with an excitement that held her audience captive. Her eyes shimmered with emotion when she reached the end of her tale. Liz and her Mom sat with misty eyes, awed by her story.

“Gosh, it’s so hard to believe my bratty little brother is even capable of doing something like that,” Liz said, squinting at Evan. “Now’s the time to come clean.”

Joe eyed Liz incredulously. “When have you ever heard Evan lie about something unless it was to protect someone’s feelings?”

“I can name a few times,” Liz retorted. “Like when he took mom’s car for a joy ride in the middle of the night when she was sleeping.”

Evan chuckled. “I was fifteen. We could swap some secrets if you’re in the mood.”

“No, no,” Liz backpedaled, her eyes twinkling. “It was actually me who took the car that night.”

Laughter erupted around the table again, a warm endnote to their lively discussion.

Sarah returned to the topic at hand. “Evan had it custom-made for me. The jeweler who crafted it even polished it for me recently. I guess I do use it as a comfort source.”

“Truly, Evan. That’s a gift to be treasured,” Bridget whispered, clearly touched.

Liz shook her head in disbelief. “Who’d a thunk it? My bratty little brother is sweet as pie.”

Taking advantage of the moment, Evan stood. “Speaking of pie, who’s ready for some apple pie?”

Despite being stuffed from dinner, everyone agreed to a thin slice of pie to sweeten their palette after a savory feast.

Although their stomachs protested, already sated by the sumptuous feast, everyone found just enough room for a delicate slice of pie. The pie’s sweetness was the perfect epilogue to an evening of savory abundance and emotional warmth.

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**Scene #62: Sarah's Dinner Roll Gambit**

The warm glow from the chandelier bathed the room in a soft, welcoming light as Sarah sat among Evan's family, still a little in awe of how quickly they'd pulled her into their familial cocoon. Conversation bubbled around her like champagne--effervescent, sweet.

“You'll see some of our holiday traditions tonight and tomorrow. Does your family practice any holiday traditions?” Bridget inquired, her eyes twinkling like the star on top of the Christmas tree.

“My dad was never one to make a big deal at Christmas time. My mom always bought a Christmas tree, and we decorated it. But that was the extent of our tradition.” Sarah’s thoughts drifted momentarily to past Christmases, filled more with social obligations than genuine warmth.

She snapped back to the present. “I guess we did have one. I never really thought of it as a tradition. My father came from modest beginnings. When things were going well for us, he didn't want us to over-indulge just because we could afford to. At Christmas time we were each allowed to buy or make each other just one gift. The gift had to be under a certain dollar limit which changed over the years. When I was old enough to walk, on Christmas day or Christmas Eve, we would do something to give back to the community. It was different every year. Sometimes it was working at a soup kitchen, sometimes passing out toys to underprivileged children.”

“Wow. You’ve been a philanthropist since you were a toddler.” Liz's voice was playful but sincere.

The words that Evan chose to follow Liz were a symphony to Sarah's ears. “Sarah is an amazing woman. Always has been, always will be.” His gaze locked onto hers, and a blush crept up her cheeks, her heart throbbing with affection.

“We also have a version of a one gift tradition,” Bridget continued.

“Is that the movie Evan said you watch every Christmas together?” Sarah wondered aloud.

Joe rolled his eyes. “Don't tell me you're going to make us all watch that movie again.”

“It's a great movie, Sarah's going to love it,” Liz retorted, defending her tradition.

“Whatever you say, dear,” Joe grinned.

Bridget returned to the point at hand. “After dinner, and the dishes are all done, we each get to open one present on Christmas Eve.”

Evan sighed, a mix of regret and relief washing over his face. “I may have to forgo that tradition this year. With all my volunteer work, I have had to cut my hours at the gym. I only have one gift for each of you. I would've gotten something for you mom if I knew you were coming.”

Bridget simply smiled, an answer without words. “Your and Sarah's presence shall be our gift tonight. What better gift than to see a young couple in love.”

Evan moved to hug his mom, gratitude and love woven into the simple gesture. At that moment, the table seemed to groan under the weight of its empty plates and gluttonous joy. It was time for the dishes.

“Alright, little brother. You know the drill: we did the cooking, you do the cleaning,” Liz announced.

“I'll help you clean up, Evan,” Sarah offered, earnest in her intent.

“Not a chance, Sarah. You’re our guest, and our guests are not made to clean. Come join us in the living room. Evan will be done in no time.”

In a split second, inspiration struck Sarah. She looked down, feigning a mask of rejection and sorrow. “Earlier you told me that I was a member of the family. Now you tell me you only consider me as a guest.”

A sudden hush fell. Liz's expression shifted to one of pure guilt, and Evan, Joe, and Bridget stumbled over their words in an attempt to mend the faux pas. As the apologies reached a crescendo, Sarah couldn't contain herself any longer.

“Gotcha!”

A beat of stunned silence and then a chorus of laughter and applause filled the room. Sarah felt her heart soar. She was one of them, truly and utterly.

Joe extended his hand for a high-five, the first she'd ever given. “Well, there's no question about it now. You are officially part of the family. That was well played!”

“That was impressive. I never saw that coming,” Liz admitted, hugging her tightly.

“Honestly, I surprised myself,” Sarah chuckled, relishing the warm embrace.

Liz spun Sarah around to face Evan, who just started rinsing the dishes and loading the dishwasher. “Time to do the dishes!”

Sarah's eyes fell on a basket of leftover rolls. Inspiration struck again. She picked one up, took aim, and shouted, “Hey, Liz!”

Confused, Liz looked her way.

“Catch this!” Sarah hurled the dinner roll across the room. Liz caught it with the agility of a seasoned outfielder.

“Now, I feel like family,” Sarah declared, her words punctuated by a roomful of hearty laughs.

Sarah's unexpected throwing of food and playful banter had everybody laughing in stitches. Liz, Joe, and Bridget went to the living room, still talking about Sarah’s creative ending to the Christmas Eve feast.

Sarah looked at Evan, partially proud of herself, partially horrified. “I can't believe I just threw food! At your sister, no less!”

Evan gave her a great big bear hug and a big kiss. “And I've never been more proud of you!”

# Chapter 16: The Unseen Gifts of Christmas Eve

**Scene #63: Unplugging for Love: A Christmas Commitment**

The family's enduring tradition of opening one Christmas Eve gift each had been lovingly upheld. A mix of paper and ribbons, remnants of the unwrapping frenzy, lay scattered on the floor, testifying to the moments of joy and surprise. Sarah's gaze found Evan's across the room. Though they both were wrapped up in the holiday spirit, an undercurrent of anticipation ran through her. She had admonished herself earlier for breaking a promise and sneaking in some work. Evan hadn't been mad--just a soft-spoken request to not make a habit of it. Yet Sarah felt she had something more to give, a redeeming gesture that would say more than any words could.

Evan's mom, Bridget, stifled a yawn, setting her coffee mug on a coaster. "I hate to be a party pooper, but would anyone mind if I head back to my hotel? The time difference has caught up with me."

Liz stretched and hugged her mother. "Just be back before eight a.m. That's when we'll be up to open the rest of the gifts."

Evan unlocked the front door, and a rush of frigid Chicago air swirled in. "Any signs of snow, Liz?"

Liz squinted at the starlit sky, her breath clouding in front of her. "Unfortunately not. I was really hoping for a white Christmas this year."

"I heard there's a slight chance of snow tomorrow," Joe offered, scratching his beard.

Liz shook her head. "They always say that. We haven't had a white Christmas in three years."

The door closed, keeping the icy wind at bay. "I think Sarah and I are going to head to bed. We've got a big day tomorrow."

The weight of her earlier transgression--sneaking in some work despite her promise--still lingered, but she'd come up with a solution. A gift of sorts. A peace offering and a pledge all in one. "I know you already opened your Christmas Eve present, Evan. Would it be a severe violation of tradition if I were to give you a second present this evening?"

Evan turned to Liz, the household’s arbiter of all things traditional.

Liz looked at Sarah, something passing between them. A silent understanding. "No, there are no such rigid restrictions in our traditions."

Wonderful!" Joe interjected, grinning. "Does that mean I can skip watching that movie for the hundredth time tomorrow?"

Liz chuckled. "Except for that tradition, dear."

"Awesome! Thank you so much. I'll be right back," Sarah announced, dashing out of the room.

"Did Sarah just use the word awesome?" Evan's eyebrows shot up.

Joe and Liz burst into laughter, sharing a knowing look as Sarah disappeared down the hallway. When she returned, her laptop and phone were cradled in her arms. She handed them to Liz.

Evan blinked, at a loss. "Sarah, you don't have to do that."

Liz held the devices, her eyes meeting Sarah's. "Your gesture is enough."

Eyes locking with Evan's, she felt as if the room's air had been siphoned away, leaving only the electric charge between them. "I know I don't have to. That's why I want to."

With a nod, Evan signaled to Liz, giving her the go-ahead. As Liz began to turn away, Sarah darted over, leaning in to whisper something into her ear. Whatever she said brought a burst of giggles from both of them. Liz whispered back, her words adding a conspiratorial sparkle to their eyes.

When Sarah returned to Evan's side, he looked utterly befuddled. "What was that all about?" he asked.

Giggling, she threw her arms around his neck, her heart feeling as though it had expanded, packed to the brim with love and an emotion she had yet to name. "I'll never tell."

Their lips met, and as they kissed, Sarah felt more present than she had in years, right here in this small living room in Glenview, Illinois. With no need for her phone or laptop, she'd given Evan the only thing that truly mattered: her undivided attention. And in that moment, that felt like the greatest gift of all.

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**Scene #64: Adrift in Euphoria**

Sarah felt Evan's lips part from hers, a bittersweet touch that left her yearning and fulfilled at the same time. They were in the living room, the air rich with the scents of the season: wreaths that Liz had hung, the fresh pine of the Christmas tree, and the warm aroma of holiday-scented candles. The love and acceptance from Evan's family had wrapped her in a warm cocoon, making the evening feel like a dreamscape.

Hand in hand, they moved toward the guest bedroom. Each step was an echo of the blissful evening, The warmth of Evan's family--his mother's nurturing tone, Joe's sense of humor, Liz's easy camaraderie, the look of pride upon Evan's face--filled her, each experience an emotional thread woven through the tapestry of the evening Sarah's mind replayed these moments, like a cherished film she could watch on a loop.

As they neared the room, she replayed the moment she'd handed Liz her phone and laptop for safekeeping--a willing disconnection from the outside world. It was as if she'd unplugged from one reality and plugged into another, one radiant with warmth and love.

When they reached the guest room, Evan went to his suitcase to fetch his toothbrush and toothpaste. Meanwhile, Sarah stood motionless in the center of the room. Evan flashed her a loving grin. "I'm off to brush my teeth. You want to go first?"

His voice was a gentle ripple across the still waters of her mind. She didn't--couldn't--respond. Her senses were alive, intensely so, as if the very fibers of her being vibrated at a higher frequency. Evan's eyebrows knitted together in a momentary confusion but then he shrugged, interpreting her silence as acquiescence.

As Evan stepped out, Sarah floated more than walked to the closet. She reached for a T-shirt and shorts to serve as her nightwear. The fabrics whispered against her fingers, akin to the caress of velvet petals, or the fur of a kitten. Her feet sank into the carpet; it was as though she walked on a cloud--each fiber cushioning her, cherishing her.

Colors radiated their essence to her. The beige of the carpet shimmered like golden sand, and the blues and greens of the hanging dresses sang ocean songs. Sound, however, was a muted symphony, like the world had hushed its breath, making room for this expansive yet intimate moment.

It was all so vivid, so real yet surreal. There had been a time--scuba diving in the Bahamas--where she'd experienced something close to this serenity, this vivid saturation of life. But even that paled, evaporated like morning mist under the radiant sun of her current state.

Time slipped through her fingers. Evan was back, almost as if he'd never left. Her clothes were changed, but the transition was lost in the haze of her euphoria. His lips moved, words shaping in the air between them. She understood their meaning--sort of--but they seemed to float around her, unable to penetrate her blissful fog.

"Can you manage from here?" Evan asked, handing her a toiletry bag.

She managed a nod, enough to send him satisfied back to the bedroom. Sarah wandered into the bathroom, her hands finding a bowl of potpourri on the sink. Her nose took in the individual symphonies of lavender, citrus, and pine, every note pure and clear. Then she found an unlit candle; its essence of almonds and vanilla was a lingering hug.

Her fingers brushed the plush towels, marveling at the cotton that felt softer than a newborn's skin. Even the faucet drew her in. The cool metal felt impossibly smooth, like a silk ribbon frozen in time.

Sarah made her way back into the bedroom, her nightly routine--whatever it was--forgotten in this blissful oblivion. Evan's voice started to seep through the veil, his repetitions of her name becoming louder, more urgent, like far-off waves gathering force.

Yet Sarah remained, for now, adrift in her own sea of vivid sensations and overpowering emotions, not yet ready to return to the shore of reality.

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**Scene #65: Unbridled Emotions**

Evan's voice, previously a distant echo, began to gain substance and clarity. It pierced the veil of her euphoria, repeating her name with a force that gathered like an incoming tide. Sarah felt a gentle pull, as if her consciousness were being drawn back from some distant, dreamy horizon. It was a jarring transition, like being yanked out of deep water into the open air. The vivid colors, the heightened sensations, the world she'd been adrift in, all began to recede like a fading daydream.

For a brief moment, she felt disoriented, caught between two contrasting realities. Her senses abruptly downshifted, adjusting to the room's muted tones and textures. Evan's face swam into focus, his eyes imbued with a mix of concern and curiosity. It was as if she'd crossed some invisible boundary and rejoined the world they shared. And though she still felt the lingering touch of her extraordinary state, it was Evan's voice, insistent and warm, that anchored her firmly back to the present.

Evan saw the change in Sarah's eyes, a transition from a far-off gaze to an immediate, centered focus. "There you are," he said softly, relief rippling through his words. "I thought I'd lost you to another universe for a second."

Sarah smiled, still feeling the tingling remnants of her euphoric experience. "You could say that. I was somewhere... amazing."

He moved closer, his eyes searching hers as if trying to read the story they held. "I want to hear all about it, but first, are you okay? You had me worried."

"I'm more than okay, Evan," she assured him. "I feel like I've just come back from the most incredible journey, even if I never left this room."

Evan took her hands in his and sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling her gently to sit beside him. "Then let's talk. I want to hear everything you felt, everything you saw. And maybe," he paused, "we can figure out how to visit that universe together next time."

Evan shifted on the bed, sitting cross-legged, and held his hands out, palms up, as an invitation. Sarah mimicked his posture, allowing her knees to gently touch his. She placed her hands into his open palms, and the connection sent a jolt of sensation through her body, as if their skin had its own secret language. Still partly enveloped in her recent euphoria, the simple touch felt magnified, as though they had bridged not just a physical gap but an emotional and spiritual one as well.

Sarah felt a joyful sense of connection flood through her. Here she was, fresh from a mystifying, solitary experience, and yet she found herself eager to share it, to let Evan in on the secret corners of her emotional landscape.

So, they talked. Evan listened intently as Sarah did her best to articulate the inexpressible, to give shape and form to the feelings and sensations that had swept her away. And as they delved deeper into their conversation, Sarah realized that the blissful state she'd just emerged from had been but a prelude. The true beauty lay in this simple yet extraordinary moment: two souls converging in genuine understanding, enveloped in a love that promised endless possibilities.

For a fleeting moment, silence enveloped them like a warm, invisible blanket. Sarah felt Evan's hands gently holding hers, their knees softly touching, and everything around them seemed to fade away. Something strange and unfamiliar began to stir within her, starting somewhere deep in her diaphragm. It was as if an invisible liquid slowly began to fill her up, rising higher and higher, threatening to overflow.

What is this feeling? Sarah wondered, her father's teachings on emotional stoicism flashing across her mind. This isn't rational. This isn't controlled. Panicking, her thoughts raced. What's happening to me? What the-- But it was too late; her eyes brimmed over, and tears started to cascade down her cheeks.

Evan's eyes searched hers, a storm of concern building. "Sarah, what's the matter? Why are you crying?"

She released his hands, her arms flopping to her sides in an almost comical display of bewilderment. "I don't know."

The concern in Evan's eyes began to falter, eclipsed by the dawning realization that her tears weren't born of sorrow. "Are those happy tears or sad tears?"

With an almost child-like helplessness, she gestured with her arms again. "I don't know."

As her voice climbed an octave, Evan's face finally relaxed into a tender, amused smile. He couldn't decrypt the emotional hieroglyphs etched across her teary face, but he knew they spelled something like joy. "Well, are you happy or sad?"

Her tears streaming freely now, she practically wailed, "I'm so happy! I've never been happier in my life!"

In a watershed moment, 21 years in the making, Sarah's emotional dam finally burst, and Evan embraced her, chuckling softly. There was an endearing naivety in her emotional overflow, something he had never expected from her, and it deepened his affection. He pulled back, still holding her, his smile a mix of amusement and wonder. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I don't know," she said for the third time, her voice tinged with laughter and tears, a cocktail of raw, unchecked emotion.

Evan lay down on his back, pulling Sarah down beside him. Still awash in her uncontrolled tears, Sarah lay on her side, her head finding a comfortable spot on his chest. Evan's arm wrapped around her, and together they embraced the enormity of the moment, as ineffable for him as it was transformative for her.

And so, with the ebbing of her tears as the only herald, Sarah drifted into sleep, her last waking thought a marvel at the evening's revelation. Beside her, Evan also succumbed to slumber, their breathing syncing in the quiet darkness, sealing an emotional odyssey, neither would soon forget.

# Chapter 17: A Christmas to Remember

**Scene #66: The Morning After**

Sarah awoke to an empty bed, the soft glow of morning light filtering through the curtains. She felt like she'd run an emotional marathon, her energy drained by the emotional catharsis of the previous evening. She propped herself up against the headboard, eyelids heavy but thoughts racing.

Minutes later, Evan walked into the room carrying a large thermal mug full of coffee in one hand and a small bottle of orange juice in the other. He offered her the coffee with a warm smile. "Morning, beautiful."

Sarah took the mug from him, her hands wrapping around the warm vessel. "You're my hero," she said before taking a slow, satisfying sip. The contentment that spread across her face was a testament to her gratitude.

Evan sat on the edge of the bed and gently brushed stray strands of hair from her face. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I have a hangover," Sarah mumbled, setting the coffee mug on the bedside table.

He raised an eyebrow. "You only had one glass of wine last night."

"It's not from alcohol," she replied, rubbing her temples. "I think I'm emotionally hung over from last night. What on earth did you guys put in the food? Made me go all kinds of crazy."

Evan chuckled, his eyes softening. "We spiked the atmosphere with love."

She shot him a look that was half serious, half amused. "Could you maybe put a little less love in the air today? I don't think I can survive another emotional tsunami."

He leaned in, giving her a light kiss on her lips. "Um. It's Christmas. I make no promises." Evan paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "Besides, you know what we got Liz for Christmas. Knowing her, it's bound to stir up some kind of emotion."

No need to fret, Sarah assured herself. Last night was a fluke, a momentary lapse. I was blindsided, but now I'm braced for it. And after that downpour of tears, I'm practically drought-level dry. No chance of a repeat performance.

With a playful roll of her eyes, Sarah took another gulp of her coffee. "Then I'm gonna need a lot more caffeine and hydration."

Evan burst into laughter at her exaggerated seriousness. "I've already showered, and I'm good to go. The bathroom's all yours. You've got 30 minutes before Liz's ironclad 8 AM start time for opening presents."

Sarah shook her head. "I don't know how I'm gonna make it, but I'm never late."

"That's just one of the many things I love so much about you," Evan said, kissing her once more before standing up.

He left the room, closing the door gently behind him, leaving Sarah alone with her coffee and her thoughts, both simmering in the tranquility of the morning light.

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**Scene #67: Liz's Christmas of Commitments**

It was 7:45 a.m., a quarter hour before the agreed-upon gift-opening time, and Liz and Evan sat at the dining room table, each sneaking glances down the hallway with a sense of anticipation. The air held a mix of excitement and impatience, like a pot ready to boil over.

Evan broke the silence, his eyes still lingering on the hallway. “Liz, I’d like you to open the gift from Sarah and me last. If that’s okay?”

“I didn’t know money was so tight, Evan. You didn’t have to get me anything. But of course, I’ll open it last if you’d like.”

“The good news is the gift for you didn’t cost a penny.”

“Hmm, a priceless gift you say. Color me curious,” Liz responded, now genuinely intrigued.

Their attention shifted back to the subject at hand. “You’re probably going to win,” Evan finally said. “Sarah was a little late to rise today.”

“I’m surprised Joe’s not out here right now,” Liz mused, worry tingeing her voice. “He’s been up since 6 a.m., restless. He’s been acting strange all morning--really, all week.”

Joe had been jittery, his actions tinged with an uncharacteristic urgency. Evan weighed his sister’s words for a moment before replying, “Probably because he was trying to keep it a secret about Mom’s visit.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Liz sighed, “but he’s still acting weird, even though the secret is out.”

Before Evan could reply, the sound of footsteps echoed down the hall. Sarah was the first to appear. Evan jumped from his seat, pumping his fist. “Yes! Bragging rights for a year!”

Sarah raised an eyebrow, her face a picture of bewilderment, as she moved straight to the coffee pot. “Do I want to know what I just walked into?”

Joe emerged just moments later, eyes fully alert but his hands visibly trembling--a telltale sign of nervous energy. He too made a beeline for the coffee pot.

“We’ve got a surprise for you,” Liz proclaimed, locking eyes with Evan.

Liz and Evan each grabbed a curtain, casting a shared nod before yanking them open. Beyond the glass patio doors lay eight inches of pristine snow.

Liz’s face lit up, a radiant blend of childlike joy and adult wonder. Beside her, Evan’s imagination kicked into overdrive, scheming up snowmen of various shapes and sizes.

“See, I told you it was going to snow today,” Joe said, his voice steadier now.

“You did tell me that!” Liz bounded over to Joe and planted a jubilant kiss on his lips. The jitteriness seemed to ebb away from him, if only for that moment.

A knock echoed from the door, pulling everyone’s attention. Liz and Evan looked at each other and in a synchronized voice declared, “Mom’s here!”

As the last family member arrived, the stage was set for the day’s main event--the opening of the gifts.

Sarah took a deep breath, steadying herself. Whatever is in those wrapped boxes can’t be more surprising than last night, she thought. I’m ready now. For whatever comes next.

The living room of Liz and Joe’s Glenview apartment was bursting with Christmas spirit. Twinkling lights from the tree cast their glow over festive wrapping paper and bows. Holiday music filled the room, keeping pace with the laughter and the crinkling of wrapping paper. The curtains had been opened wide, letting the brightness of the snow-covered world outside pour in like liquid happiness.

Each family member had claimed their present-opening spot--on the couch, armchairs, and even on the floor. Evan and Sarah, as if telepathically in sync, effortlessly handed out gifts, reading tags and depositing the colorfully wrapped packages into the hands of their loved ones.

Liz, always pragmatic, had given Joe a set of winter boots, socks, and a coat that he had been eyeing for weeks. Evan received socks too, along with a gift card to his favorite sporting goods store and a gym bag he’d wanted but hadn’t been able to afford. Sarah unwrapped a spa gift card from Liz, her eyes lighting up momentarily, though her emotions stayed typically subdued.

Joe, not known for his gift-choosing skills, had resorted to an assortment of gift cards for everyone--Amazon for Liz, Target for Evan, and Starbucks for Sarah.

Bridget, bringing a little extravagance into the celebration, handed out airplane ticket vouchers to Liz, Joe, and Evan. For Sarah, it was a Starbucks gift card, a small but thoughtful gesture.

Evan and Sarah’s gift to Joe had stolen the show, for a while at least. A signed football from Joe’s favorite Bears player. Joe was floored. How did they manage it? Evan just shrugged, a twinkle in his eye. “Let him keep guessing.”

Then it was Evan’s turn to be surprised. From Sarah, he received tickets to an upcoming Chicago Bulls game and a signed jersey from his favorite player. “How did you...?” he began, only to be met with Sarah’s sly grin. “You answered your own question when Joe asked,” she said.

The pendant care kit that Evan gave Sarah may not have been extravagant, but the sentiment was rich. “I don’t want you to have to keep going back to the jeweler to keep your pendant shiny. I’ll do it for you.” He could feel Sarah’s hand squeezing his shoulder, a silent, proud affirmation of his gift choice.

Finally, only one gift remained--the one from Sarah and Evan to Liz. It sat there, conspicuously last, as Evan had requested. Sarah gave Evan another gentle squeeze on the shoulder, her eyes meeting his. Both of them knew how meaningful this gift was, not just to them but to Liz as well.

The gold folder in Liz’s hands felt like it weighed a ton. Sarah’s heart raced as she watched Liz shake it lightly, joking about its contents. So far, so good, Sarah assured herself, taking deep, even breaths to counter the emotional undercurrent she felt bubbling up from the depths of her soul.

Liz’s fingers worked the seal open. Hold it together, Sarah mentally commanded herself. She could feel her inner walls straining, almost caving under the weight of the impending emotional flood. This is the big test.

Liz opened the folder, her eyes scanning the contents. A sudden cascade of tears broke free, painting her face a shade of red Sarah had never seen before. Liz looked over at Evan, pride swelling in her gaze, before passing the paper to her mother and then to Joe.

Sarah’s own eyes betrayed her. Tears filled them, brimming at the edges but not quite falling. Not a win, but an acceptable tie, she thought, taking it as a small triumph in the constant tug-of-war between her stoic training and her human emotions.

The paper Liz had been holding was Evan’s preliminary grade report for the semester. Four A’s and one B. His GPA had risen from the precarious 3.0 to a more comfortable 3.2, more than keeping his promise to Liz.

Liz, still weeping, enveloped Evan in a heartfelt hug. Sarah’s own eyes were miniature lakes by now, threatening to spill over. Just a little more.

And then it happened. Liz turned her attention to Sarah, pulling her into a hug that seemed to fuse their souls. Forehead against forehead, Liz locked eyes with Sarah. “Evan has told me all that you’ve done for him. How you helped him get his grades up, how you helped make him a better man. This gift is as much from you as it is from him. Thank you so much.”

Another hug, and that was it. Sarah’s emotional dam broke. Tears flowed freely, not as violently as the night before, but with enough force to humble any notion she had of being impervious to emotion.

For the next ten minutes, the room filled with chatter and congratulations. Evan, ever humble, was quick to credit Sarah for the help she’d provided. Everyone seemed pleased with their gifts, a harmonious end to a memorable morning.

Sarah wiped away her tears, silently forgiving herself for the emotional display. That should be the end of it, she thought, feeling her muscles relax. Or so she hoped, oblivious to the roller coaster ride that was far from over.

Just when Sarah thought the emotional rollercoaster had reached its final stop, Joe started shuffling around the base of the Christmas tree, his movements oddly deliberate. What is he doing? she wondered, feeling her gut tighten. She was still recovering from the earlier emotional outpourings, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

“Ah, what do we have here?” Joe pretended to discover something under the tree. With a suspiciously neat package in hand, he walked over to Liz. Sarah watched in slow motion as Joe dropped to one knee in front of her.

Time itself seemed to slow. The room was dead silent except for the muted Christmas music playing in the background. Sarah felt her heart pounding, her eyes widening, as Joe looked up at Liz, his own eyes shimmering with a mix of hope and vulnerability.

“Liz, I’ve spent a lifetime waiting for someone like you,” he said, his voice tinged with emotion. “Will you marry me?”

The room exploded into a chorus of sobs and gasps. Liz burst into tears, nodding furiously as Joe slipped the ring onto her finger. Evan wiped his eyes, the emotional armor he usually wore now completely shattered. Bridget was a crying mess, clutching a tissue to her face.

And then there was Sarah. Tears welled up, breaking all the dams she had built in her mind. Screw it, she thought. Since I can’t control it, I might as well embrace it. And embrace it she did. Tears cascaded down her cheeks, but for the first time that day, she welcomed them.

As Liz and Joe shared their tearful kiss, Sarah allowed herself to revel in the moment. The pure, uninhibited joy. In the short time she’d known Liz, she had grown incredibly fond of her. This was a woman who had opened her home to Sarah, who had treated Evan like a son, and who had just given her something precious--a family.

Sarah felt grateful, humbled, and profoundly connected to everyone in that room. She had lost her battle against her tears, but in that surrender, she found something much more valuable: a sense of belonging, of unconditional love, and a newfound appreciation for the messy but beautiful tapestry of human emotion.

After the emotional intensity of Joe’s proposal and acceptance, the room shifted to a quieter, more contented buzz. Congratulatory hugs were exchanged, hands were shaken, and cheerful chatter filled the room. Liz floated over to Sarah, her ring glittering in the light. “Look at this beauty, would you?” Liz whispered, holding out her hand so Sarah could get a close-up view. “Isn’t it just perfect?”

Sarah grinned, admiring the ring. “Absolutely stunning, Liz. He did good.”

Just as everyone seemed to settle into this new, happy reality, Sarah’s voice pierced the warm ambiance. “I just have one question.”

Every eye turned her way, tension momentarily building again. Perhaps she was about to ask something serious, something related to the life-altering moment that had just occurred?

Sarah grinned mischievously. “I’m dying to know. What the heck is the name of this movie we’re going to watch?”

The room erupted into laughter. Evan, Liz, and Bridget burst out in unison, unable to hold back their chuckles. Joe, however, buried his face in his hands, shaking his head from side to side. He had been secretly hoping that the grandiosity of his proposal would spare him another viewing of the infamous film.

Liz, Bridget, and Evan exchanged glances and then, in perfect unison, declared, “White Christmas.”

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**Scene #68: Joe and Liz Elope**

Evan's phone lit up on the coffee table. He picked it up and scanned the text message from Liz. "Well, they dropped Mom off at the airport. They have some errands to run but should be back by early noon."

Sarah looked up from her laptop, "You don't think it's strange, do you? Running errands on the day after Christmas?"

Evan shrugged. "She mentioned they might be in a weak cell area, so not to worry if they don't respond right away. Liz is always meticulous about planning."

By 4 PM, Evan's meticulous sister still hadn't returned, and the clock was ticking down on their college departure time. Evan was pacing the room, stealing glances at the door every few seconds.

They're fine, Sarah thought, though she started to share a bit of Evan's concern. Liz wouldn't let anything bad happen.

Just as Evan started to consider calling for the tenth time, the front door swung open. Liz and Joe walked in, their faces flushed with what could only be described as post-marital bliss.

Evan sighed in relief. "There you are! We were about to send out a search party."

Sarah noted how Liz and Joe exchanged glances, a secret twinkling between them. Oh, they definitely did more than errands.

"Sorry we're late," Liz said, "It was busier than we expected."

"Busy doing what?" Evan asked, though it was more of a rhetorical question.

Joe grinned and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small envelope. "Why don't you open this and find out?"

Evan tore the envelope open and his eyes widened as he read the marriage certificate. "You two eloped?"

Liz showed off her ring, a radiant smile spreading across her face. "Surprise!"

Evan was the first to react, his initial shock turning into a beaming smile. He enveloped his sister and Joe in a bear hug. "Congratulations, you crazy lovebirds!"

Sarah got up and hugged them too, her eyes meeting Liz's. She felt a surge of happiness, not just for Liz and Joe, but for the affirmation that love, so unexpected and joyous, could really be as simple as a spontaneous 'I do.'

"We better head out," Evan said, realizing the time. "But this--this is the best going-away present ever."

Liz laughed. "We thought you might like it."

As Evan and Sarah gathered their things for the drive back to college, Sarah's eyes fell once more on Liz and Joe, standing arm in arm in the doorway. Life is full of surprises, she thought, and love--love is the sweetest surprise of all.

# Chapter 18: Ring and Unspoken Promises

**Scene #69: Evan Gives Sarah a Promise Ring**

Valentine's Day enveloped Sarah's apartment in a romantic ambiance, a day of emotions both felt and unsaid. The month leading up to this moment had been a tranquil interlude, allowing her and Evan to bond further, their connection deepening. As Sarah waited for Evan's knock, she couldn't help but imagine the infinite possibilities of the coming days.

A soft rap on the door announced Evan's arrival, and their embrace was a mix of excitement and tenderness. Their lips met in a sweet, lingering kiss before they settled down, gifts waiting to be exchanged.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Sarah," Evan breathed, his eyes twinkling.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she echoed, her heart pounding. She handed him an envelope containing the brochure for the lovers' retreat she had planned. "I thought this could be fun for us."

Evan's eyes widened as he flicked through the brochure. "This looks amazing. I can't wait."

She chuckled, pleased by his reaction, but then her eyes caught sight of a small velvet box he held. What's that? She wondered.

With a somewhat nervous expression, Evan opened the box, revealing a simple yet elegant promise ring. "Sarah, I want this to symbolize my commitment to us, to what we have and what we can be."

She stared at the ring, then at Evan. Her heart raced, torn between elation and a ripple of apprehension. A promise ring. That's serious. But it's beautiful. And it's from Evan.

"May I?" Evan asked softly, holding the ring up.

"Of course," she murmured. As he slid the ring onto her finger, a rush of emotions engulfed her. It felt strangely monumental, this tiny piece of metal encircling her finger.

Without thinking, she snapped a quick selfie with her new ring and uploaded it to Facebook. Let the world see. Today, I'm just a girl in love.

As if reading her thoughts, Evan announced the next surprise. "How about a romantic dinner to celebrate?"

The Italian restaurant Evan had chosen was intimate and elegant, the tables adorned with white tablecloths and lit by flickering candlelight. A string quartet played softly in the background, giving the evening an air of timeless romance.

Yet, as Evan talked about the future during dinner--always so indefinite, so unsure--Sarah felt a pinch of unease. He spoke as if there was no expiration date, but she knew better.

What happens when I go off to grad school? What happens to us?

She pushed the thought away, focusing on the taste of her tiramisu and the warmth in Evan's eyes. \_Tonight, there are no worries. Tonight, it's just love.\_

They returned to her apartment, and the night culminated in a passionate intertwining of souls and bodies. Yet, even as she got lost in the sensations, the ring on her finger felt heavy--a weight that both thrilled and terrified her. A promise, yet a question. A joy, yet a concern.

As she lay in Evan's arms, staring at the ceiling, Sarah realized that despite the euphoria, questions remained, coiling like shadows in the corners of her mind. Tonight, they could be ignored. But tomorrow was another day.

The questions would wait. But they wouldn't disappear.

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**Scene #70: A Web of Half-Truths**

Sarah sat on the plush couch of her apartment, her legs folded beneath her. Katie lounged beside her, absorbed in the minute details of the promise ring that Sarah extended for inspection. It was a simple, unadorned band of thin gold, yet it held a discreet elegance. Light bounced off its surface in quiet glimmers, echoing its subtle significance.

"It's beautiful, Sarah, but what does it mean to you? What does it mean for you and Evan?" Katie asked, looking from the ring to Sarah's face.

Evan. Yesterday was magic, but what does a promise ring mean for us in the long term?

As if on cue, the sound of her phone ringing cut through her thoughts. Sarah glanced at the screen and felt her stomach drop—Dad.

Oh God, I knew this would happen.

She turned the phone so Katie could see the caller ID. "It's my dad. I have to take this in my bedroom."

Sarah's fingers trembled as she closed her bedroom door behind her, gripping her phone like a lifeline. She steadied herself before tapping the green answer button. "Hi, Dad."

"Sarah, explain the promise ring from Evan," her dad's voice cut through the silence, the authority in his tone undeniable.

Sarah sat on the edge of her bed, its comfort doing little to assuage her rising anxiety. "It's a symbolic gesture, Dad. Nothing more."

She thought, It's so much more. Evan means more.

Her father's sigh resonated through the line, steeped in disapproval. "A 'symbolic gesture' is a distraction, Sarah. You have too much to lose."

Too much to lose, or too much to gain?

Summoning courage, Sarah pushed back, "I've got scholarship offers lined up, Dad, including an Ivy League. I'm scheduling campus tours. My academic life is on track."

Please, let's not delve deeper.

"Your academics have never been my concern," he replied, undeterred. "It's your judgement I question."

Sarah felt a cold wave crash over her, tightening her chest. "My judgment is fine."

Is it? Evan's promise ring says otherwise.

Her mom chimed in, "What do you feel for this boy, Sarah?"

The silence was oppressive, a vice tightening around Sarah's heart. She finally mustered, "Evan and I understand our relationship. We know where it's headed."

We don't know. We've never discussed it, and that terrifies me.

"Understanding implies a mutual agreement on priorities. Has that been clarified?" her dad questioned, challenging her yet again.

Sarah hesitated. "We're both focused on our futures, Dad. We're not losing sight of our goals."

Except I've never been more unsure.

"You're speaking in uncertainties. Don't let ephemeral emotions derail your future." The weight of her father's words felt like an anchor pulling her down.

"I won't, Dad," she said, almost pleading.

"Marcus Chamberlain spoke highly of you. He was impressed with your dedication to philanthropy. You have a track record of excellence, Sarah. Don't compromise it."

I've already compromised it, the moment I fell for Evan.

Her father's voice sharpened. "When is the deadline to commit to a college?"

"Mid-April," she answered, her voice almost a whisper. "There's time."

Time for what? To make the biggest mistake of my life, or to give up what might be the best thing that ever happened to me?

He paused, and for a moment Sarah thought she might have convinced him. Then he spoke, his words calculated and stern. "You have obligations, Sarah, to your future and to yourself. When the dust settles, you better have made the right choices."

The line went dead. Sarah sat there, her eyes stinging, the phone still pressed to her ear, and the ring--its weight both light and impossibly heavy--gleaming on her finger.

What's the right choice when everything feels so wrong?

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**Scene #71: Secrets Shared and Withheld**

Sarah closed the bedroom door behind her, each click of the latch amplifying the discord between her mind and heart. She returned to the living room, where Katie was immersed in a textbook. As soon as Sarah entered, Katie sensed the change in her friend's demeanor and closed the book.

"You alright?" Katie asked, concern creasing her brows.

Sarah sat down on the plush couch, unable to take her eyes off the promise ring Evan had given her. "I wasn't honest with my parents. I downplayed what this ring means. I downplayed us."

Katie shifted her attention entirely towards Sarah, her book long forgotten. "If you were any other girl in the world, I'd know exactly what to say. I'd either listen to you and validate whatever you tell me, or I'd tell you Evan's a great guy and to follow your heart. But you're an enigma, Sarah. You're different than anyone I've ever known. You're an amazing woman. I know you love Evan, but I also know that you've spent your whole life with a very clear plan. You're going to have to decide if those two truths can coexist."

Sarah felt like her soul had been laid bare. She's right. Oh God, she's absolutely right. "I've thought about that often. Evan's life is here. He wants a family, needs to be by his sister. There's no way I can ask him to follow me to the East Coast or the West Coast after I graduate."

"Yeah, that's a tough one," Katie acknowledged. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to talk to him."

Sarah clenched her hands, digging her nails into her palm as if she could bury her uncertainties in the grooves of her skin. "And say what? I can't even fathom the words 'I want to break up.'"

"Do you want to break up with him?" Katie probed gently, watching her friend's face intently.

Sarah's eyes misted over. "I don't. But what really scares me is, at some point, I have to make a decision. Evan clearly has a path he wants this to go on. The pressure's all on me to decide between the man I love now, and the man who gave me life, who I've respected for the entirety of that life. In my mind, I've already made the choice to follow the path I set for myself. It's logical. It's safe."

Katie tilted her head, puzzled. "What about that scares you?"

Sarah took a deep breath. "What scares me is that my heart doesn't agree. What terrifies me is the thought of choosing Evan, not because it's right for me or the best choice for me, not even because I want to spend my life with him." She paused, her voice barely above a whisper. "What scares me to death is that I might choose Evan simply because I can't live without him."

The room went quiet, the silence thickening with every second. Katie looked at Sarah, her eyes brimming with empathy but void of solutions. Sarah's gaze drifted back to the promise ring, its sparkle now seeming more like a question than a promise--a question she wasn't sure she could ever answer. Her heart drummed a discordant rhythm. Is love enough to give up my dreams? Or are my dreams enough to give up love? She felt further away from an answer than ever before.

And the unknown--her unknown future--terrified her.

# Chapter 19: Cap, Gown, and Unforeseen Choices

**Scene #72: Amidst Joy, A Shadow Looms**

As the orchestrator of the night's grand affair, Sarah found a temporary sanctuary in this adjacent multipurpose room. While Evan, Guido, and a select group of friends were out there in the Champaign Hotel Grand Ballroom, busy transforming it into an epicenter of post-graduation revelry--a celebration they'd all pooled their money to make a reality--Sarah sat alone, ostensibly to finalize her pre-party checklist. Yet, as she sat there, the room seemed to her a metaphor for her own life at this crossroads moment. It was a blank canvas, and just like her future, it held a myriad of possibilities, yet remained undefined. It’s so clean, so devoid of marks. A space waiting for something to happen, something to give it character. Her thoughts drifted from the checklist on the table to the checklist of her life’s ambitions, the grand plans she'd nurtured for so long.

How perfectly parallel, this room and I, she mused. The white walls were like the empty pages in a journal, waiting for words to capture emotions, stories, or dreams. The untouched whiteboard, a manifestation of opportunities yet seized, a slate waiting to be filled with equations that solved for 'x'--that unknown variable that was her future. She, too, was at a precipice, about to step into the unknown, and the simplicity of this room seemed to mirror her own unchartered territory.

Just as the room was outfitted with the bare essentials--a table, chairs--so too was she equipped with the fundamental decisions that would shape her life. Should I move with Evan to Chicago or should I head for an Ivy League campus? In the same way this room would eventually see lively discussions, host hard decisions, or even serve as a sanctuary for someone seeking a moment of peace, she knew that her life, too, would take on the hue of the choices she made.

As the room waited in its unassuming emptiness, she realized she couldn’t let her life remain a blank canvas for too long. A room comes alive not just by the furniture you put in it, but by the memories you make there. Her life, she concluded, would be much the same; it would be defined not just by her choices, but by her courage to make those choices in the first place.

In the stillness of the multipurpose room, Sarah grappled with the conflict in her mind. Her fingers hovered over her checklist but her thoughts were elsewhere, meandering through the maze of her uncertain future.

I've been so sure for so long, she thought, recalling the career and education plans she'd meticulously outlined years ago. She had her school picked out, a full scholarship extended like a golden ticket to the future she'd imagined. Everything's set, all the boxes ticked, except one. Evan.

The tension in her chest tightened at the thought of him. Why is it so hard to say it out loud? Why does this feel like choosing between my dream and a future with him? Evan seemed so content, always brimming with enthusiasm, as though he didn't have a care in the world about what came next. Maybe he's afraid too, afraid to pop the bubble we're living in.

Evan's vision of the future seemed to stretch no further than the city limits of Chicago. Sarah knew that for him, the city was more than a home; it was a beating heart full of connections and lifelong friendships, bound to the sports teams he adored and a sister he idolized. A sister who'll probably make him an uncle sooner than later. The thought made her smile but also filled her with a pang of what could only be described as preemptive nostalgia.

I can't just discard everything I’ve worked for, can I? Her plan had been so clear, but the lines had blurred over time. She loved Evan, but was love enough to give up on the roadmap she'd set for herself? My plans can't be hostage to someone else's dreams.

The sense of certainty would surge in her, only to ebb away, leaving her stranded in a sea of doubt. Just sign it, sign the damn paper. Why is my hand trembling? Is it because I haven’t talked to him? Is it because letting go is as hard as holding on? The college had been patient, granting her extension after extension, but her time was running out. Evan was making strides with his interviews, and she had just weeks left to claim her scholarship.

Why can't I just do it? She asked herself, the weight of the pending decision pressing down on her like a heavy cloud. Her eyes fell on the empty whiteboard again, its blankness reflecting her inner turmoil. She knew she was the only one who could fill it, just as she was the only one who could fill in the blanks for her future.

So many questions, and I'm the only one who can answer them. She took a deep breath, steadying her shaking hands. I can't let my life stay an empty canvas. It's time.

In that small, unassuming room, Sarah felt the walls close in, and yet, in that confining space, she found the room to make a choice.

The door swung open abruptly, and Evan's energetic presence filled the room. He wore a smile so broad it almost split his face in two.

"Hey," he exclaimed, crossing the room to where Sarah sat. He held out his hands to her, pulling her up to a standing position. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" His lips met hers in an impassioned kiss that took her breath away.

Sarah pulled back, eyes twinkling but puzzled. "What's got you so happy? What are you thanking me for?"

"I got the job!" Evan's excitement was palpable, his eyes shimmering with elation. "Seriously, Sarah, you're the reason I even got the interview in the first place. It's just outside of Chicago. I can't wait to tell Liz!"

"Wow, Evan, that's amazing!" She meant it, her heart swelling with pride for him. "But you don't owe me any thanks. You got this job on your own merit; I was just the stepping stone."

He looked at her with earnest eyes. "Either way, you're a part of this victory, and I've got a big surprise for you."

"Surprise?" Her brows arched in curiosity.

"Just wait here. I'll be right back." He gave her another quick kiss and rushed out of the room, leaving her in a whirling dervish of thoughts.

This is it. This is the sign. Sarah felt her heart thud as she sat back down. Evan landing a job in Chicago was the final piece of a puzzle she had been hesitant to solve. I don't know how I'm going to say it, but I have to. If I don't, we'll both be stuck in a limbo that neither of us can escape.

She pondered the weight of her pending decision. If I try to keep this relationship going while I'm miles away, I won't last a month. I'll drop everything and run back to him. The stakes were clearer now, as was the path she needed to take. She felt a pang of heartache but knew it was a necessary precursor to the freedom they both needed to seek their individual dreams.

Sarah inhaled deeply, as though taking in the last scents of a chapter that was closing. She decided that tonight, she would bask in the joy of Evan's new job, the culmination of their college journey, and their shared memories. But tomorrow, she would finally have the courage to talk about the next chapter. Tomorrow, she would set them both free.

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**Scene #73: Unveiling Unwelcome Guests**

Evan popped his head inside the door, his eyes alight with the kind of excitement that could only mean one thing: surprises. "You ready for your surprise?"

"Sure," Sarah replied, her tone filled with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. Evan swung the door open wider, revealing the figures of her parents standing behind him.

Wait, what? Mom and Dad? Sarah felt her stomach drop, her eyes flitting between Evan and her parents. Before she could ask for an explanation, Guido's voice rang through the hall, calling for Evan with an urgency that left no room for delay.

"Ah, gotta go, Guido needs me," Evan said, blowing her a quick kiss before darting out and closing the door behind him.

Sarah turned to face her parents, confusion and disbelief knitting her brows together. "What are you doing here? I thought you flew back to Seattle."

Her dad wore a stern expression that settled over his face like a cloud on a sunny day. "Evan came by our hotel. He asked us to stay for the party. Said there's a surprise for you, but we promised not to spoil it."

Her heart raced. A surprise? From Evan? "You can't tell me what it is? Is it a good surprise?"

"We are here, aren't we?" Her father remained stone-faced, unmoved by her probing.

"You don't seem very happy about it," she noted, the uncertainty in her voice unmistakable.

Her father sighed, softening just a little. "The surprise is fine. It's about you finishing at the top of your class, and we're proud of that. What bothers me is that you haven't chosen a college yet. Evan seems to think you're not going anywhere."

Sarah's pulse quickened. "What did he say?"

Mildred, her mother, interjected. "Sarah, it's not about what he said; it's just the way he—"

Her father cut her off. "Let's be straight with each other, Sarah. You haven't told him about your decision to go to the East Coast for college, have you?"

Her inner voice whispered that there was more to it than that, but she kept that thought to herself. As the weight of her father's disapproving gaze bore down on her, she felt cornered.

"I plan to talk to him about it tomorrow," she offered, hoping to quell his skepticism.

He wasn't satisfied. "Do I have your word on that?"

Raising her gaze to meet her father's, she enunciated her words carefully. "Yes, Father, you have my word."

As if on cue, the door swung open once again, revealing a beaming Evan. "Alright, folks, the party's about to kick off!" he exclaimed, excitement bubbling over. The tumultuous exchange with her parents was momentarily eclipsed by Evan's infectious energy, and Sarah found herself caught between her own inner turmoil and the vibrant celebration awaiting her.

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**Scene #74: Evan's Public Party Proposal**

The Grand Ballroom at Champaign Hotel buzzed with the energy of celebration. Twinkling chandeliers cast a golden glow on the sea of graduates, friends, and family members. A live band played upbeat tunes near a rented photo booth, which had a line of people waiting for their turn. The open bar was besieged by eager revelers, contributing to the increasing level of intoxication--and thereby jubilation--in the room.

Evan had told Sarah's parents that her surprise would unfold 30 minutes into the party. Furnished with comfortable chairs at the back of the room, they settled down to wait, their faces masked with curiosity.

Guido, a natural showman, relished his role as the evening's emcee. Dressed in a slightly oversized tuxedo, he juggled handing out gag awards with banter, jokes, and occasional dance moves. As the clock neared the half-hour mark, the atmosphere seemed to heighten.

"And now, folks, the moment you've all been waiting for!" Guido boomed into the microphone, his eyes scanning the crowd until they found Sarah. "Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Sarah, this year's valedictorian!"

Sarah's heart jolted. This was unexpected.

With a grand gesture, Guido beckoned her to the stage. Evan, grinning like a Cheshire cat, offered his arm, and they made their way up together. As they reached Guido, Evan slipped away quietly, his hand fishing for something in his pocket.

Guido launched into a glowing speech about Sarah's academic achievements, handing her a well-crafted plaque. Sarah glanced at it, trying to mask her confusion. She'd never expected an award, and certainly not from this group. Most of the faces staring back at her were people she'd hardly connected with during her time at the school. Their raucous applause seemed inexplicably loud, almost urging. What's going on here?

Just then, the applause mutated into hollers, people spinning their hands and chanting, "Turn around! Turn around!"

Turning, her eyes met Evan's. He was on one knee, a diamond ring in his outstretched hand. A collective hush fell over the room as Guido held the microphone to Sarah's mouth.

Her thoughts raced at lightning speed, fumbling through ways to decline Evan's proposal without causing a scene. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead, her lips formed the word, "Yes."

The room erupted in jubilant cheers, whistles, and applause. Evan slipped the ring onto her finger and then, as if he'd captured a star from the sky just for her, he lifted her off the ground and spun her around. When he set her down, his lips found hers--a passionate kiss that sealed their love and silenced any lingering doubts.

As Sarah's eyes flitted open, her gaze was instinctively drawn to the back of the room, past the sea of jubilant faces, to where her father stood. His eyes were unreadable, but his jaw was set, his mouth a flat line. For a second, their eyes met, and in that brief connection, Sarah felt a twinge of regret--not for saying yes to Evan, but for the disappointment that clouded her father's face.

Her heart sank as she watched him take her mother's hand and quietly lead her out of the ballroom, exiting through the far entrance without a word. But even as they disappeared, Sarah felt Evan's arms tighten around her, and once more, she was pulled back into the magnetic warmth of the love that had just promised to be hers, forever.

He's my choice, Dad, whether you agree or not.

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**Scene #75: A Lifeline or a Challenge?**

"I saw the way your dad looked at you, and at me. You okay?" Evan asked.

Sarah sighed, her shoulders dropping as she turned to face him. "I don't know, Evan. It's all so complicated."

He nodded, taking a step closer. "Love is supposed to be the simplest thing, but the world has a way of making it complicated. Believe me, I know." Evan glanced away, as if summoning memories of his own complicated relationship with his father. "I proposed because I love you, more than anything. But I also know I asked in front of everyone we know. People say yes for all sorts of reasons. Obligation shouldn't be one of them."

Sarah felt her heart tighten. He's giving me an out. He's letting me go before we've even begun.

Evan continued, "I've got a week to return the ring, no questions asked. If you need more time, I can wait. I want you to be all in, or not in at all. I don't want you to ever think you're trapped."

Her eyes met his, seeing the sincerity there. She thought about the ring on her finger, then at Evan's face--the man who'd stormed into her organized, planned life like a whirlwind, yet somehow made it better. I don't want to live without this ring, or the man who gave it to me. Whatever the cost, whatever I have to sacrifice, it's worth it to be with him.

She reached for his hand, intertwining their fingers. "I'm all in, Evan. Whatever comes next, we'll face it together."

Evan's face broke into a relieved grin, his eyes twinkling like the ring that bound them. "Then let's face it head on."

Such is love, Sarah thought, feeling the weight of her decision like a bittersweet ache in her chest. You're never entirely certain, but you jump anyway. She took a deep breath, bolstered by her commitment to Evan.

"Okay," she said, determination settling into her bones. "I'm ready to talk to my father."

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**Scene #76: A Choice Between Love and Legacy**

The elevator seemed to crawl upward, each floor a tick of the clock, counting down the moments to her inevitable reckoning. When the doors finally opened, Sarah took a deep breath and stepped out. The short walk to her parents' penthouse suite was a long mental journey, retracing the steps that had led her to this emotional crossroads.

She paused before knocking, steeling herself. The door swung open almost immediately, revealing her father's stern expression and her mother's softer, yet equally disappointed face.

"Come in, Sarah," her father said, his voice carrying the weight of unspoken judgments.

She entered the room and hesitated, her eyes meeting her mother's before finally resting on the panoramic view of the city. The skyline, with its twinkling lights, seemed so settled in its grand design, contrasting sharply with the turmoil in her soul.

"Please, have a seat," her father gestured toward a chair, his voice a study in controlled emotion.

She sat, feeling the room close in on her, a courtroom of plush carpets and expensive upholstery.

"We had an agreement, Sarah. Your mother and I have been supporting your journey, understanding that you had certain aspirations," her father began.

Sarah felt her eyes sting. Aspirations she had once wholly shared with them. But then Evan had happened, turning her well-laid plans into questions rather than certainties.

"That was the plan, Dad," she found herself saying, her voice tinged with a sadness she hadn't expected. "I know, but--"

"But what? You're suddenly engaged and planning to move to Chicago? Do you understand what that means for your future?" Her father's words were more pleading than accusing, a note of desperate confusion in his voice.

Her mother softly interjected, "You've worked hard, and an Ivy League school is just the start. That's always been your dream, too, hasn't it?"

It was my dream, and maybe it still is. But love--her love for Evan--had complicated the clarity of that dream. Sarah's eyes moved from one parent to the other, finally resting on her father.

"Choices have consequences," he said, his tone resolute. "If you follow this new path with Evan, you'll do it without our financial support. You have one month to decide."

One month to choose not just between Evan and my former life, but also between two versions of myself. A new Sarah, molded by love, and an older one, crafted from years of shared dreams and parental expectations.

"I need to think," she managed to say, standing up.

Her father also rose, nodding solemnly. "Take the time you need, within this next month."

Exiting the room felt like stepping out of one world and into another, as if the door behind her had sealed off a chamber of her past. Now, standing in the hallway, Sarah realized that her life had reached a precipice, a moment of daunting choices and irrevocable changes.

# Chapter 20: Love on a Precipice

**Scene #77: The Rush to the Altar**

The rain tapped lightly against the windowpanes, a soft contrast to the turmoil raging inside Sarah. She sat on the bed, fumbling with her engagement ring while Evan lay beside her, his eyes brimming with a joy she wished she could fully share.

Love shouldn't be this complicated, she thought, staring at the ring that felt both like a promise and a shackle.

"Morning, beautiful," Evan greeted softly, tucking a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. "How'd you sleep?"

"As well as I could," she managed, her voice tinged with an unease she couldn't hide.

Evan sat up, leaning on one elbow, his eyes scanning her face. "Something's bothering you. What is it?"

Sarah inhaled deeply, the weight of her father's ultimatum and her own pending decision pressing on her. I need to do this. Before doubts and deadlines overrule my heart.

"Evan, do you remember when your sister, Liz, eloped the day after she got engaged?" she asked, avoiding his gaze.

"Yeah, I do," he said, a hint of curiosity entering his voice. "Liz and Joe were so sure about each other, they didn't see the point in waiting."

Sarah caught her lower lip between her teeth, weighing her next words carefully. "How would you feel about us doing the same? Eloping as soon as we can?"

His eyes widened, searching her face for sincerity before exploding with delight. "You're serious? If it was good enough for Liz, it's good enough for me. Absolutely, let's do it!"

Sarah's heart swelled at his reaction, and yet a pang of apprehension still remained. Evan pulled her into a kiss, his lips meeting hers with a fervor that spoke volumes. He's so sure, so happy. How can I feel so torn when he feels so certain?

As they parted, Evan's eyes were radiant, hopeful. "Then it's settled. We'll elope."

Sarah nodded, saying, "It's settled," but her voice lacked the full measure of conviction Evan's held.

His arms tightened around her, but her own embrace felt fragile, almost hesitant. Evan was already lost in dreams of their future, but Sarah remained tethered to the present, straddling a line between the path she'd always envisioned and the new one she was carving out beside him.

Is this the right choice? God, what am I doing?

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**Scene #78: Bittersweet Vows**

The chapel was intimate, with sunlight spilling through stained-glass windows and casting colorful patterns on the wooden pews. Evan stood at the altar, the look in his eyes that of sheer joy and anticipation. Sarah took slow steps down the aisle, her arm linked with her her soon-to-be brother-in-law, Joe's, who wore a proud smile. Her dress was simple, her bouquet modest. Everything had been arranged quickly, but she didn't care about the frills. This was about her and Evan.

Yet as Sarah looked at Evan, her heart twisted in ways she hadn't expected. This should be the happiest moment of my life. So why am I so torn?

Evan's smile broadened as she approached, almost as if he were drawing her in with his happiness alone. When she finally stood beside him, his hand found hers, squeezing it reassuringly.

"You look breathtaking," Evan whispered, leaning close enough that only she could hear.

"Thank you," Sarah managed to reply, her voice a mere whisper. She returned his smile, but her eyes couldn't lie. They were the windows to her uncertainty, even if he couldn't see it.

The officiant began, speaking words about love, commitment, and the journey of marriage. Sarah heard him but didn't listen. Her mind was caught in a loop of 'what-ifs.'

What if I'm making the biggest mistake of my life? What if the life I had planned--going to an Ivy League school, joining my father's firm--that was my true destiny?

Guido, standing beside Evan as his best man, noticed Sarah's faraway look but misinterpreted it as bridal jitters. Evan, however, was too caught up in the magic of the moment to notice anything amiss.

"Do you, Sarah, take Evan to be your lawfully wedded husband?" the officiant asked, snapping her back to reality.

Sarah's heart pounded in her chest. This was it. The point of no return.

She glanced at Evan, his eyes full of love and devoid of doubt. Could she really break this man's heart? The man who loved her so unconditionally?

"I do," Sarah said, her voice quivering but clear.

Evan repeated his vows with robust assurance, sealing it with, "I do," as if those two words could hurry them into forever.

With the exchange of rings, a kiss, and the pronouncement from the officiant, they were husband and wife. The chapel erupted in subdued applause, mostly from their few close friends in attendance.

But as Evan kissed her, his lips meeting hers with a tender urgency, Sarah's smile was tinged with a sadness she couldn't shake. I'm married. I'm his wife now.

As they turned to face their friends, their small crowd throwing confetti as they walked hand in hand down the aisle, Evan wore the look of a man who had conquered the world. Sarah, however, wore the look of a woman who wasn't sure which world she belonged to.

Sarah met Evan's eyes, and for a fleeting moment, all her doubts faded away, leaving only him, only them, and the boundless, beautiful life they could have together. This is enough. It has to be.

But even as she thought it, Sarah knew: her decision to marry Evan was a solution to a problem that wasn't fully solved. And that realization, that tiny nagging doubt, formed the undercurrent of the ceremony--a bittersweet note in an otherwise joyous melody.

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**Scene #79: Cracks in the Facade**

Sarah gave Evan a gentle kiss, her lips betraying no secrets as they met his. "I'll be right back, just going to the restroom," she said calmly. She navigated through the small crowd of well-wishers, her smile a practiced art, and slipped into the sanctuary of the chapel's restroom. As the door clicked shut behind her, she leaned against the sink, her hands flat on the cool surface. Her eyes met her own reflection, a bride in a dress, a facade of joy skillfully painted on her face. The feeling that gripped her was more than doubt—it was a visceral, gnawing tension that started from her core and radiated outward, a potent blend of love, fear, and an unsettling regret. Her stomach clenched as if rebelling against the gravity of her choice. Oh my god. What have I done?