# Chapter 1: Evan Volunteers for the Weekend

Scene #1: 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 #2: 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 #3: 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 #4: 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 #5: 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.