# Chapter - A Budding Romance

0100 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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0101 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.

Time seemed to slip away amidst the vast ocean of knowledge. It was only when she glanced at the time displayed on her phone that realization hit her. She was late! The class she taught would start in mere minutes. Panic surged through her veins.

She hastily packed her belongings, making sure not to pause the audio seminar. She wanted to catch every last word, even if it meant multitasking amidst the chaos. As she scooped up her books and notes, she opted to leave her earbuds in, the compelling voice in her ears serving as a comforting presence amidst her mounting anxiety.

She dashed towards the library's staircase, hoping that if she hurried, she could make it to her class on time. The echoing steps of her shoes resonated with her heartbeat, amplifying the sense of urgency. As she ascended, the world outside remained a mystery to her. With her focus on the seminar and her impending class, the last thing on her mind was what lay beyond the library's exit.

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0105 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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0110 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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0115 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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0116 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 - Evan Charmed Sarah

0120 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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0121 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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0122 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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0123 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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0125 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 chemistry 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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0130 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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0132 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 - Evan Has a Necklace Made

0135 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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0137 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 - Sarah Prepares for First Date

0140 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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0142 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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0143 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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0145 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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0150 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 - Sarah and Evan’s First Date

0160 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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0164 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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0165 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 - Sarah Meets Evan's Friends

0200 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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0202 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 'chemistry.'" 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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0204 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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0206 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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0208 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 – Date Night at Sarah's Apartment

0210 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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0212 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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0215 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 – Patti's Dilemma

0220 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.

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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0222 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’ve practically made a living off Evan’s rejects. 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 – Attends Sarah's Fundraiser

0225 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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0227 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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0229 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 short on 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."

As Sarah hurried off to fulfill Marcus's request, Marcus and Evan continued to engage in lively conversation, forming an immediate bond over shared interests. Marcus's demeanor was relaxed and at ease, his laughter genuine and unrestrained. Evan's quirky, charming personality had won over Marcus, and Sarah's anxiety about introducing her boss to her boyfriend had been entirely unwarranted.