# Chapter - A Budding Romance

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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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 intricacies 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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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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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 for everyone to hear, but not the intended recipient. His voice echoed around them, the words floating above the heads of chuckling onlookers.

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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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 on 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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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 seconds after meeting her? 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

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 in a mock show of surrender, 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."

"Thanks, dude. I feel better already," Evan admitted, and with that, they turned their backs to the library and started the journey home

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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.

Guido had managed to coax him away from countless futile hours of scouring the Internet for his elusive mystery girl. And in retrospect, he realized that Guido was right; his image, drenched in the rain, desperate and waiting for a woman who might never show up, wasn't the kind of impression he wanted to give off.

This morning, however, Evan woke 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 realized 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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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 stolen 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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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. 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. He reached the door first, holding it open for her with a kind smile, cementing in her mind that this mystery man was indeed a true gentleman

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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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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 city 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.