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# Chapter 1: "The Divorce"

## Scene 1: "Why?"

***Seven years after “The Kiss”…***

DIVORCE. The word, stark and merciless, seemed to leap from the poisonous pages of the divorce decree at Evan Vaughn. It dominated the document, its letters grotesquely swollen, obscuring everything else and sending a jolt of pain through his body. A pain amplified by the fact that today marked the seventh anniversary of the day they first met, be it a serendipitous or cruel twist of fate. To Evan, it felt like the Universe was punishing him for reasons unknown.

His eyes, heavy with unanswered questions, shifted to Sarah. How did our fairytale beginning, that first kiss seeming so magical, lead to such a bitter finale? he brooded. Question after question gnawed at his mind, all echoing a single, haunting word: Why?

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## Scene 2: "Broken Vow"

In the bustling heart of downtown Chicago, within the opulent offices of Sarah’s attorneys, the quiet expanse of their top-floor suite stood in stark contrast to the storm brewing outside. The large window offered a view of the day’s bleak skies, perfectly reflecting Evan Vaughn’s distress as he grappled with the end of his marriage. The oppressive atmosphere seemed to underscore the solemnity of the moment, deepening the sense of finality.

As Evan’s eyes wandered from the window back to the disturbing divorce documents on the table, a childhood vow haunted him. At just ten years old, amidst the turmoil of his parents’ divorce, he had sworn never to walk the same path. Yet, here he was, engulfed in the very scenario he had vowed to avoid. This broken promise added a layer of personal failure to his pain. Losing Sarah was agonizing, but the violation of this deeply held vow stirred turmoil within Evan that transcended the end of their marriage. It was a betrayal of his younger self, a pledge made in innocence and broken in despair.

As much as Evan’s 6-foot-two, fit and athletic frame caught the eye, it was his captivating hazel eyes, so expressive and warm, that often drew people in. More than his appearance, Evan was cherished for his compassionate nature and helpful ways.

Evan’s gaze fixed on the attorneys, his stomach knotting as Sarah’s high-priced lawyers circled his own more humble attorney, engaging in a futile debate over trivial aspects of the divorce decree. This orchestrated performance, aimed at justifying their exorbitant fees, seemed absurd to him. The core terms had already been settled with Sarah; everything else was mere theatrics, a fact that made the spectacle even more irritating to witness.

As Evan shifted his focus to Liz, his heart filled with a complex blend of gratitude and a twinge of sorrow. Observing her absorbed in the paperwork that would mark Sarah’s exit from their business, he felt a surge of protectiveness. Liz, his unwavering pillar, was taking on yet another burden from his fracturing world. Her dedication in this moment only deepened his admiration and love for her.

As Evan refocused on Sarah, his throat constricted, overwhelmed by a rush of emotions threatening to surface. The casual elegance she now wore starkly highlighted the end of their shared journey, her hair flowing freely in contrast to its usual strict styling, evoking memories of their initial, electric connection. She remained as mesmerizing as the moment they first collided, a dance that had felt like destiny. That memory, now bittersweet, stood as a silent testament to their lost future, with Evan struggling to hold back tears, mourning the love and dreams irrevocably gone.

As Evan’s gaze lingered on Sarah, his silent pleas for her to return his look went unanswered, her attention captivated by the world outside the window. At that moment, Evan felt a sharp pang in his chest, a physical manifestation of his longing for a sign of their once-shared love. His breath hitched, a struggle against the sorrow threatening to surface as tears. The silence between them grew heavier, laden with all that remained unsaid. This unbridgeable gap left Evan feeling lost in a maelstrom of his own emotions, his desperate need for answers echoing unanswered in the void between them.

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## Scene 3: "Crossroads of the Heart"

High above the churning waters of Lake Michigan, Sarah’s gaze was captured by its tumult, a reflection of the storm raging within her. As she watched the relentless waves, her fingers obsessively caressed the inexpensive pendant Evan had crafted for her—a stark contrast to the expensive jewelry she often wore. Why do I continually choose this pendant over all others? Why do I love it so much? The question hung in her mind, laden with an emotional weight transcending mere curiosity.

As Sarah’s fingers traced the contours of the silver-coated pendant, crafted from the toy glasses of a porcelain doll, its cool smoothness against her skin stirred a heartfelt response, echoing the emotional whirlwind of their first date. The touch of the antique token sent shivers through her, reminiscent of the night Evan unveiled its significance, binding it forever to their enchanting first encounter. Tears had welled in her eyes back then, marking the first time Sarah had ever been moved to such sentimentality. As she reminisced, a similar sensation coursed through her, piercing her cultivated stoic facade with a raw, emotional energy that echoed a time of uninhibited magic and possibility.

Forgoing her usual attire for battles of boardrooms and contracts, Sarah opted for a more subdued ensemble, a fashionable yet casual pair of slacks and a buttoned shirt, signaling a truce rather than a confrontation. Her typically restrained blonde hair now flowed freely in waves down to her shoulder blades, softening her appearance and revealing a glimpse of the woman who once chose to follow her heart. This departure from the norm underscored her internal struggle, contrasting sharply with the steely blue-gray eyes that usually hid behind glasses, eyes now exposed and reflecting a sea of tumultuous emotions.

Sarah grappled with profound regret, its complexity entangling her thoughts. As she sat there, a knot formed in her stomach. Should I have said no to his proposal and spared Evan this pain? The question echoed in her mind, a haunting refrain. She mourned not just the hurt she caused Evan but also the divergence from her own life plan, a path once so clear. Her breath became shallow, a testament to the struggle within. The decision to marry him, once a departure from her ambitions, now felt like a misstep that had led them both to this moment of sorrow. Had she chosen differently, perhaps the pain that now filled the room, as tangible as the air they breathed, might have never existed.

The thought of confronting Evan’s gaze filled her with dread. Known for his perpetual optimism, Evan’s disposition was a constant sunrise, his anger an eclipse she had never witnessed. To see such a light dimmed by resentment or pain was a scenario Sarah could not bear. It was this fear, more than any other, that had driven her to leave a departing note—a silent retreat instead of a face-to-face farewell.

Sarah was intimately aware of Evan’s nature: his inherent kindness, eternal optimism, and his tendency to seek solitude as a refuge for healing rather than expressing his despair outwardly. His retreats, whether to the gym or his secluded cabin nestled in the tranquility of nature, were his ways of regaining strength, favoring quiet reflection over confrontation. Yet, a question lingered in her mind, Why am I so afraid to look into Evan’s eyes? It wasn’t just guilt that held her back; the fear ran deeper, touching a place in her heart she hadn’t dared to explore.

A glance towards Liz, who was intently reviewing the document that symbolized the closure of a significant chapter, provided Sarah a momentary solace. Liz’s gentle smile of understanding acted as a soothing salve to Sarah’s tense nerves. It was an unspoken recognition of the difficult choice Sarah had confronted, a decision fraught with deep considerations and inevitable repercussions. Although Liz might not have wholly agreed with Sarah’s manner of departure from Evan, her empathy suggested an understanding of the necessity for their separation in ways Evan couldn’t grasp. Sarah reassured herself, Evan always values Liz’s insight. She will help him understand why this had to happen.

Liz’s gentle tap on Evan’s forearm served as a soft interjection, asking for Evan’s final review of the documents. This small gesture briefly bridged the gap that had formed between them. “Evan, everything looks alright to me. Can you please double-check? I want to make sure it meets your expectations and that I didn’t overlook anything,” Liz said. Her request, aimed at ensuring procedural accuracy, carried a deeper resonance, acknowledging the finality looming over them.

At that moment, as Sarah observed Evan navigating the contract without her for the first time, an unexpected guilt washed over her. She had always somewhat seen Evan as innocently unaware of the world’s mundane realities, almost childlike in his dependence on her for guidance through life’s tedious yet crucial tasks. This new perspective of him, tackling responsibilities alone, sparked a complex emotion within her. She worried, How will he function without me? Will he be alright without me? The sight of Evan, so determined yet so out of his element, underscored the significant change their lives were undergoing. Despite her swirling emotions, the knowledge that Liz would be there for Evan, guiding him as she once did, provided a slight, albeit significant, solace amidst the storm of her thoughts.

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## Scene 4: "Evan Demands Answers"

Evan, attempting to honor Liz’s request, sifted through the sales agreement for the transfer of Sarah’s share of the company. The document might as well have been in another language for all the sense it made to him. With a heavy sigh, he leaned back, his trust placed entirely in his lawyer’s hands and judgment, having barely glanced over the divorce paperwork himself.

The room fell silent as Sarah’s lead attorney stood, signaling for attention. He announced that the divorce agreement was ready for signatures, highlighting a few minor adjustments made at Evan’s attorney’s request. The final changes to the sales agreement transferring Sarah’s share of the company to Liz were also noted, marking a pivotal moment in the proceedings.

Documents were distributed to Sarah, Liz, and Evan. Evan’s eyes lingered on Sarah as she swiftly signed her name, her hand moving with a speed he hadn’t seen before. The sight stirred something within him, a mix of disbelief and a simmering frustration.

Evan, unable to contain his feelings, spoke out, his voice laced with a rebellious undertone, “Wow, you really are anxious to get divorced. I’ve never seen you sign anything so fast.”

Sarah, without pausing her rapid signing, responded with a hint of frustration in her voice, “I’ve already read the documents and agree to the changes your attorney made.”

Evan’s resolve hardened, his voice steady and insistent, “I’m not signing anything until I get some answers.”

Sarah, pausing briefly, pleaded with Evan, her voice soft yet firm, “Come on, Evan, don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

Evan stood his ground, unwavering in his demand, “I’m not signing, Sarah. We committed to each other when we got married, and then one day, you just moved to Seattle and refused to speak to me directly?”

Sarah, her frustration mounting, tried to justify, “Evan, I told you it wasn’t working anymore.”

Evan, his voice rising with determination, countered, “Leaving me a note telling me it wasn’t working anymore is not enough. I deserve better than that. I am not going to sign anything until you answer some questions.”

Liz, with a tone of apologetic resolve, sided openly with her brother, adding a layer of familial solidarity to Evan’s demands. “I’m sorry, Sarah, but I have to back Evan on this one. You know how much I care about you, but Evan does deserve some answers. I’m not signing either unless you agree to speak to Evan.”

The junior attorney, unable to contain his outrage, lashed out at Liz, “You ungrateful bitch! Sarah’s practically giving you the company.”

Sarah, her voice icy with authority yet protective of Liz, interjected, “Hold it right there! The next thing I want to hear is an apology to Liz. She exudes more class and integrity in her pinkie than me and all the attorneys here combined. You have one minute to apologize and leave. Otherwise, I’ll make sure this law firm never sees a dime from any of my contacts or my father’s for that matter. Is that clear?”

Reprimanded, the junior attorney’s demeanor shifted from indignation to contrition. “I’m sorry, Sarah. And I’m sorry, Mrs. Bennett, I let my temper get the best of me, and it will never happen again. I’ll excuse myself from this meeting.”

In the aftermath, Evan’s attorney sought to reason with Evan, aiming to bridge the widening gap with understanding and benevolence. “Look, Evan, he may have been an asshole about it, but he did make a point that should not be lost. I know for a fact Sarah has rejected beneficial advice from her attorneys. She has been cooperative and fair. I would even say she has been generous in ways I have never experienced in these types of settlements. I recommend you sign these documents.”

Despite the attorney’s counsel, Evan’s resolve remained unshaken, his anger evident. “Do you think I care about money? She can have it all as far as I’m concerned. It means nothing to me. I want answers and won’t sign anything until I get them!”

Sarah, recognizing the futility of resistance and perhaps the depth of Evan’s need for closure, finally relented. “He’s right; he deserves better than this. Evan, I doubt there’s anything I could say that would give you the closure you’re seeking. I never wanted to cause you more pain than necessary. Despite my reservations about discussing it, if you sign the documents, I’ll meet with you privately to answer your questions as best I can.”

Seeking to facilitate this crucial conversation, Sarah turned to her lead attorney, her voice calm yet imbued with a newfound determination. “Is there a place where Evan and I can speak privately after the meeting?”

Her lead attorney, expressing regret over the heated exchange, assured her, “I want to apologize for my colleague’s actions. That was unacceptable. Sarah, you and Evan are free to use this conference room as long as you need.”

Sarah, now facing Evan, extended the offer, her tone softening. “Thank you. Will that work for you, Evan?”

In the quiet of the conference room, Evan’s acceptance of Sarah’s offer was a silent yet profound acknowledgment. He gave Liz a nod, an unspoken agreement that it was alright for her to proceed with her signature. Then, with a sense of resignation, he signed the divorce documents and the sales agreement. This moment, marked not by words but by the weight of their actions, closed one chapter in their lives, leaving the promise of difficult conversations and the hope for understanding in its wake.

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## Scene 5: "Understanding and Goodbyes"

After the formalities of signing the divorce papers were concluded, Sarah watched as the attorneys exchanged courteous nods, marking an end to the official proceedings. Evan’s attorney whispered a few parting words of advice to Evan, guiding him out for a private conversation, leaving the conference room steeped in a heavy silence. Now alone, Sarah and Liz faced each other, an ocean of unspoken emotions swirling between them.

Sarah’s voice was low, tinged with vulnerability. “You don’t hate me, do you?”

Liz met her gaze, her expression softening. “Why would I hate you, Sarah?”

“It’s just...knowing how close you and Evan are, and him being so hurt...” Sarah’s voice trailed off as she exhaled a heavy sigh, the weight of her actions pressing down on her.

“I never wanted to hurt him. You understand why I had to do this, right?” Sarah’s eyes searched Liz’s for some sign of understanding.

Liz nodded, her voice warm and reassuring. “Yes, I understand, and no, I don’t hate you.”

Sarah’s shoulders slumped slightly, relief momentarily lightening the burden she carried. “I bet everyone in the office is bad-mouthing me. They probably think I’m the worst.”

“Evan tries to put on a brave face, but they can see he is struggling with the divorce,” Liz explained, trying to offer a perspective. “It’s hard for them not to take sides.”

“They never liked me, even before I left,” Sarah confessed, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her tone.

“They just don’t know you like Evan and I do. If they got to know you, they would feel differently,” Liz countered gently, believing in the goodness at Sarah’s core.

Sarah’s gaze dropped, her thoughts turning inward. “I regret the pain I’ve caused Evan. Sometimes, I wonder if rejecting his proposal would have spared us both.” She paused, her doubts from that time resurfacing.

“You can’t dwell on the past, Sarah. Think of the good that came from your marriage,” Liz urged, steering the conversation toward a more positive reflection.

“Good?” Sarah echoed, a sparkle of curiosity lighting her eyes.

“You were the brain behind The Vaughn Group's success, Sarah. Plus, your philanthropic work back in college was the spark for Evan's nonprofit journey. A spark that became his passion that led to The Vaughn Foundation and the great work they do. You've had an incredible impact on both Evan and the community.” Liz reminded her, emphasizing the positive ripple effects of their union.

"Evan's brought a lot to the table too. Even beyond his work at the foundation, he's been amazing with the business. His knack for managing projects and leading teams, and his way with clients? I couldn't match that," Sarah admitted, recognizing Evan's contributions.

“True, but the business side of things? Making the company profitable is where you shined. He’ll miss your expertise, but don’t worry; he’ll manage,” Liz reassured her, confidence in her voice.

Sarah expressed her concern. “I’m worried about Evan. He doesn’t even know how to file taxes. I don’t think he’s ever written a check. He’s actually good with numbers but has no interest or experience in managing finances. On top of that, he doesn’t even care about money. I’m worried he’ll go bankrupt within a year.”

“Please don’t worry. Evan is not a big spender, and I’ve already been working with him on these issues. He’ll learn what he needs to learn.”

“Thank you, Liz. Promise me you’ll reach out if there’s anything you need to know. I worry about him,” Sarah implored, her heart heavy with concern.

Liz chuckled. “Sarah, I’ve been looking out for Evan since we were kids. I’m not going to stop now.”

Sarah looked at Liz, admiration, and gratitude mingling in her gaze. “One thing I learned over the past few years is that a leopard cannot change its spots. I am who I am. But if I could be like anyone else in this world, I would want to be like you. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

Liz, visibly moved by Sarah’s words, responded, “That means a lot, Sarah. And for what it’s worth, I think you’re pretty great too.”

Their exchange, filled with mutual respect and understanding, led to a warm embrace. This simple gesture encapsulated their deep connection and shared past, offering them both a moment of solace in the midst of turmoil.

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## Scene 6: "The Last Kiss"

Evan stepped back into the conference room, his brief consultation outside leaving him visibly tense. Inside, the atmosphere shifted noticeably as he caught the tail end of Liz and Sarah’s embrace—a silent, charged moment that spoke volumes. Liz, sensing Evan’s mood, offered a brief, reassuring touch on his shoulder before making a quiet exit, the soft click of the door marking her departure.

Across the table, Sarah resettled into her chair, steeling herself with the practiced stoicism of someone bracing for impact. As Evan took his seat opposite her, the room was engulfed in a heavy silence, broken only by the weight of his glare. Sarah, maintaining a composed exterior, met his look with an equanimity borne of necessity, not indifference.

“What do you want to know, Evan?” Sarah’s voice, matter-of-fact, cut through the tension, a clear invitation for him to voice the turmoil she knew he harbored.

Evan’s attention focused on Sarah’s hand, the absence of her wedding ring sending a stab pain through him, a silent testament to the rift between them. “I want to know everything,” he began, his voice a mix of irritation and frustration. “I want to know why you left me when everything was fine. I want to know why you refused to talk to me for three months. I want to know why you couldn’t at least wait until after the divorce before taking off your wedding ring. My attorney told me you’re only using your maiden name now. None of this makes any sense to me.”

Sarah’s response was measured, an attempt to bridge the gap of understanding that had widened between them. “Things weren’t fine. We are on different paths. We have different goals. Can’t you see that, Evan?”

Evan was not easily swayed, his conviction that their issues were surmountable evident in his reply. “I don’t see anything we couldn’t have worked out. We were getting along great. Maybe our love life wasn’t what it was like in college, but it was still highly active. The business we built together is thriving. The foundation we started does great work. We are making more money than we could ever spend. I think things were working quite well,” he countered, unwilling to concede their shared life so easily.

“Why do you think we thrived in the bedroom and business?” Sarah asked.

Evan’s answer was tinged with a mild sarcasm, born of a reluctance to delve deeper into the fissures that had fractured their union. “I don’t know. Because we love each other and do good work?”

“It’s because those were the only things we have in common. A successful business and an active sex life masked the underlying problems in our relationship,” Sarah explained, her voice laden with the weight of unspoken truths.

“What problems?” he asked, genuinely at a loss.

“We are completely different people. I don’t enjoy any of the things you enjoy and vice versa. While the company was growing and the foundation was getting off the ground, we were in sync, but not anymore,” Sarah explained, her words painting a picture of divergence that had slowly, inexorably, driven them apart.

Evan leaned forward, his voice laced with a mix of confusion and desperation. “I know we had disagreements about what to do next in our life. I don’t see why we couldn’t work them out. You said you want to travel and have a family. That’s precisely what I want.”

Sarah, maintaining her composure yet her eyes betraying a hint of sadness, responded, “I wanted a child, not a big family. And you wouldn’t be the right kind of father.”

Evan recoiled slightly, as if the words were a physical blow. “Why would you say that? You know I love working with kids.”

Sarah sighed, her voice soft yet firm. “Evan, I know you will be a great father one day. I’m not suggesting otherwise. But we have completely different ideas when it comes to raising children. I want to raise my child like I was raised.”

She continued, her voice gaining strength as she spoke of her upbringing. “My parents may not have affectionately shown their love, but they made sure I always had what I needed and encouraged me to be the best at anything I did. Instead of playdates, I learned and grew in other ways. I like how I was raised, and I plan to raise my child in the same way.”

Evan listened, his face a mask of concentration. Sarah added, “I know you, Evan. Your idea of parenting will be mostly fun and games and minimal structure and discipline. It will be sports over academics. It will be chaotic at times. And I’m not saying there is anything wrong with that. It’s just not the kind of parenting that works for me.”

“As far as travel. I want to travel internationally for business. I wouldn’t be happy if I stayed here in Chicago with you. I want to grow a company, and that’s just not what you want,” she concluded, her voice steady and resolved.

Evan’s expression softened, a bit of understanding crossing his features. “And you don’t think we can find a compromise?”

Sarah’s gaze met his, her eyes reflecting a well of emotions. “I don’t regret my decision to get married to you instead of getting my master’s degree and pursuing the life I had envisioned. I’ve learned and grown with you in unexpected ways.”

She paused, taking a deep breath. “But Evan, I’m living your life, not mine. My only friends are your friends and Liz. Chicago is not my city and not where I feel at home. Now that the company has grown to its maximum size, there’s nothing left for me to do. Liz has operations running like a well-oiled machine. You are doing a great job running the foundation. I need more.”

Evan, his face clouded with confusion, finally spoke, “I don’t agree with anything you’re saying. But I see you have made up your mind. What I don’t see is why you left so abruptly and refused to talk to me.”

Sarah looked away for a moment before meeting his gaze again, her voice barely above a whisper. “Because Evan, you still have this power over me. You would find some way to pull out that emotional part of me. You would do something romantic or find a way to persuade me we could make it work. I knew I wouldn’t have had the strength to overcome that. I know this is the right decision.”

Evan leaned forward, a mix of distress and concern shadowing his features as he confronted Sarah across the dimly lit conference room. “I don’t understand why you had to go back to your maiden name so quickly,” he began, his voice thick with emotion, “or why you stopped wearing your wedding ring before the divorce was finalized.” He lifted his hand, showcasing the ring still encircling his finger, a tangible symbol of his commitment. “I still have mine on! Are you already in the market looking for someone else?”

Sarah, seated opposite him, remained silent, her body language an expression of shame. She looked down, unable to meet his gaze, her silence a deafening response to his questions. Her silence provided Evan’s answer. Evan’s heart sank, a metaphorical punch to his gut, as he buried his face in his hands, overwhelmed by a wave of distress.

She walked around the table to Evan’s side, squatted down, and gently spun his chair to face her. “Evan,” she said, her voice compassionate and consoling, “I don’t want to hurt you. I’m back in college, working towards my master’s degree, and I was collaborating on a project with a guy near my age. We went on a couple of dates, but nothing happened, Evan. Not even a kiss.”

Every word Sarah uttered struck Evan like a dart, piercing his heart. With his hands still veiling his face, he turned slightly as his head fell onto the conference room table, a gesture of utter defeat and desolation.

“I explained to him the situation. He knows he and I can only be friends for now. I am focused on my degree, and I doubt anything will come of that relationship. Please look at me,” Sarah pleaded.

Evan struggled, but he found the strength to turn and look at Sarah. The revelation that Sarah had gone on dates with another man solidified the painful truth that their relationship was indeed at its end. “So this is it? We are never going to see each other again?” he asked, his voice laced with a mix of upset and resignation.

“We live so far apart. I doubt we’ll run into each other. I don’t think it’s a good idea anyway,” Sarah replied, her words cementing the finality of their separation.

In a moment of introspection, Evan found a bittersweet peace in accepting the end of their relationship. His mind wandered back to their first kiss, a memory that brought a nostalgic smile to his face. “If this is the last time we’re going to see each other, I think we should end the relationship like it started,” he suggested with a tender reminiscence. “As I recall, I said, ‘I feel like I should kiss you.’”

Sarah’s smile mirrored Evan’s as she replied, “And I said, ‘I’m not going to stop you.’”

Evan looked deeply into Sarah’s eyes as he leaned in to kiss her. His hands explored Sarah’s back with familiar desire, untucking her blouse in the process. But the moment Sarah felt Evan’s intentions shift, panic set in. “What are you doing? We can’t do this, Evan!” she protested, fear lacing her voice.

Evan paused, his gaze pleading. “Why not?”

“We just can’t!” Sarah insisted, her resolve crumbling under the weight of their shared history and unresolved feelings.

Evan’s final plea was soft, yet challenging. “Sarah, look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t love me anymore.”

Their eyes locked, and in that moment, Sarah’s silence spoke volumes. She couldn’t deny her lingering love for Evan. Overwhelmed by a surge of affection, Sarah found herself drawn back into Evan’s embrace, their kiss reigniting with fervor. Yet, with the intensity of their connection came a wave of apprehension. Tears, rare for Sarah, broke through her composed exterior, signaling the turmoil within. “I promised myself this wouldn’t happen. I can’t do this, Evan. I’m sorry,” she stammered, hastily fixing her blouse before rushing away. Evan was left in solitude, grappling with a whirlwind of emotions: love, sorrow, and an aching desire for what once was.

Feeling the urgency to escape the escalating situation, Sarah fumbled to tuck in her blouse, her movements brisk and shaky. She dashed out the door, leaving Evan in solitude, Evan felt a cold emptiness spread through him as he muttered, “Is this really happening?”

# Chapter 2: "The Love, Annually Plan is Created"

## Scene 7: "Evan is Ready to Share his Plan"

*Timeline:* ***1 Year, 1 Month After Evan’s Divorce.***

Energized by the day’s achievements and eager for the evening’s reveal, Evan’s usual cautious driving style took a backseat as he weaved in and out of traffic along Chicago’s Lakeshore Drive. The soft glow of sunset bathed his late-model Toyota Land Cruiser, a symbol of his adventurous spirit, as it moved effortlessly between the urban landscape and the memory of rugged trails leading to his country cabin. The SUV’s dark blue body with its stark white top mirrored Evan’s essence: rooted in the city’s hustle but always reaching for the tranquility of the outdoors.

His commute doubling as a journey of reflection and anticipation. His heart raced not from the thrill of the drive but from the excitement of a rewarding session with his students and the anticipation of sharing his groundbreaking idea with his closest allies at tonight’s monthly poker party.

Evan spent his afternoon feeding his passion – working with inner-city, underprivileged teens striving to make a better life for themselves. The Vaughn Foundation offered business-oriented classes taught by experienced volunteers, experts in their fields. Evan’s students had just presented their project assignments, stunning him with their exceptional website creations. This day wasn’t just a triumph for them; it was a validation of his efforts outside the traditional school system, a testament to what these determined youths could achieve with the right support.

His students’ successes swelled his heart with immense pride. Yet, it was the electric anticipation of the evening ahead that sent his pulse racing. At tonight’s eagerly awaited monthly poker party, he was poised to unveil a concept so groundbreaking it had buoyed his spirits since its brilliant conception. Filled with boyish enthusiasm and a touch of naiveté, he couldn’t help but envision his friends and family’s reactions, I can’t wait to see their faces. They’re absolutely going to love this plan! The cool breeze wafting through the open window mingled with his surging excitement, providing a perfect backdrop to the day’s triumphs and the evening’s promising allure of camaraderie among friends and family.

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## Scene 8: "Poker Host Liz Breaks For Chloe"

Liz was in her element, bustling around her Glenview, Illinois home, setting the stage for the poker night. Liz’s appearance was that of everyday relatability, neither particularly tall nor notably petite, with a body that spoke of real-life experiences rather than gym hours. Her brown hair, cut to a practical medium length, framed her face with an effortless charm. Known for her casual elegance, Liz tonight had forgone any pretense of formality, opting instead for the classic comfort of well-loved blue jeans and a snuggly sweatshirt, embodying the casual, friendly atmosphere she cultivated at her poker gatherings.

Her kitchen was a symphony of activity as she laid out snacks and made sure the drinks were chilled just right. The house, cozy and inviting, was a testament to her love for hosting. She hummed along to the music playing softly in the background, a tune that matched her upbeat mood. But then, her phone lit up, displaying “Chloe Collette” across the screen.

Liz’s heart did a little leap—Chloe’s calls were always a mix of delight, drama, and chaos. Liz’s mind traveled back to her sophomore year in college, when she first met Chloe, then an awkward 14-year-old girl in need of a stable force. Their bond ignited instantly, with Chloe embracing the role of the little sister Liz had always craved and Liz becoming the dependable big sister that Chloe’s older sister, Rebecca, failed to be. Now, a decade later, their bond had evolved into a deep friendship, enriched by time. However, Liz’s protective, big-sister instincts lingered, a sweet reminder of their beginnings. Liz only wished Chloe didn’t live hundreds of miles away.

Without hesitation, Liz lowered the music volume, turned off the burner under the pot of simmering cheese dip, and poured herself a glass of wine. Settling onto a stool at the kitchen island, she tapped the speaker button, ready for whatever Chloe had to share. Chloe’s distressed wails echoed loudly into the room.

“Chloe, honey, take a deep breath and tell me what’s wrong,” Liz said, her voice a mix of warmth and worry.

Chloe’s reply was a waterfall of tears. “My boyfriend dumped me!”

Liz let out a sigh, no stranger to Chloe’s rollercoaster love life. “Again? What did he say this time?”

Through tears, Chloe recounted, “We had another stupid fight about nothing! He called me a ‘bitch’ and told me he never wants to see me again!”

Liz, ever the voice of reason, tried to offer a different perspective, “He doesn’t treat you very well. You two have broken up so many times. Chloe, maybe it’s best this way. I don’t understand why you always go back to him.”

Chloe’s response was almost childlike, “Because he loves me, and I love him.”

With a patience born of years of similar conversations, Liz pressed gently, “Really? Do you really love him, Chloe? Do you really think he loves you the way he treats you?”

There was a pause, then Chloe, sounding less frantic but still distressed, admitted, “I don’t know, Liz, but I don’t want to be alone.”

Liz’s advice was compassionate but firm, “Fear of being alone is not a reason to be with a man who is emotionally and verbally abusive. Please think twice before going back to him.”

Chloe sniffled, a sign she was calming down, “It doesn’t matter, he hates me. He’s never going to want me back anyway.”

Just as Liz was about to delve deeper, Chloe cut in, her tone shifting from despair to a flutter of excitement, “Oh Liz, let me call you back tomorrow. He’s calling me right now. I need to answer before he hangs up.”

Chloe’s quick goodbye left Liz alone, mid-sip of her wine, yet a gentle smile played on her lips. Liz couldn’t help but chuckle. There was something adorably predictable about Chloe’s frequent crises, reminiscent of an overly dramatic teen saga that Liz found endearing. Shaking her head with fond exasperation, she returned to her hosting tasks, the evening still unfolding ahead.

The sound of the door opening signaled the arrival of the first guest. Liz, curiosity piqued, wondered who could be stepping into her well-prepared abode. The night promised its own set of surprises, the identity of the early guest just the first.

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## Scene 9: "Evan Preps Liz for His Plan Unveiling"

First to arrive, Evan’s entrance was a whirlwind of enthusiasm, the door flying open to herald his arrival. With a vibrant energy that filled the room, he surged towards Liz, his arms laden with flowers and wine—a testament to his excitement. Liz’s face lit up at the sight, her own excitement mirroring his as she welcomed him with open arms. The exchange was a burst of joy, setting a tone of anticipation and warmth for the evening ahead.

“Hi, sis!” Evan practically shouted, unable to contain his excitement, giving Liz a brotherly hug.

Liz, taken aback by the warmth of his gesture, couldn’t help but smile. “Wow, that was some entrance! What did I do to deserve these wonderful gifts?”

Evan shrugged, a grin spreading across his face. “No special reason. I was just in the mood to give my big sis some flowers and wine!”

Liz raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. “That must have been some date last night. I haven’t seen you this excited in forever.”

Evan’s grin faded slightly, replaced by a more contemplative expression. “It was nothing spectacular. It was just a decent date like they all are.”

“And if they’re all decent, then how come you rarely go on a second date?” Liz’s tone gentle yet probing.

Evan sighed, the weight of his dissatisfaction with dating evident in his posture. “Because I want more than decent. You know how much I dislike dating.”

Liz nodded, understandingly, her expression softening. “I know. Unfortunately, dating is almost always part of the process. I know you don’t like talking about Sarah, and I don’t want to spoil your great mood. But she is a one-of-a-kind girl, Evan. Not many women will want to jump right into a relationship and treat her first date like a negotiation of a business partnership.”

A sly smile crept back onto Evan’s face. “Not if they know that’s what’s happening.”

Liz’s brow furrowed, her concern evident. “I don’t like the way that sounds, Evan. That sounds like something Guido would say. What harebrained scheme have you two concocted this time?”

Evan’s excitement was undimmed. “Guido has no idea what I have in mind. I want to wait until everybody’s here before I share my idea. I can’t believe it took me this long to figure things out.”

Liz, now thoroughly intrigued, leaned in closer. “Figure what out?”

Evan’s chest swelled with pride at his revelation. “Why I rarely go on a second date and why I’ve been feeling so hopeless and lonely. I have been approaching this dating ritual all wrong. And after yet another uninspired ‘decent’ date, I finally realized how to turn it all around!”

Liz’s curiosity was now at a fever pitch. “And you’re gonna make me wait until everybody gets here to tell me?”

Evan nodded, his playful tease evident in his voice. “Sorry, but yep! They’ll be here soon. I can’t wait to share my idea with everybody! Oh my God, Liz. I feel so amazing!”

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## Scene 10: "Meet the Poker Gang"

Liz’s husband of eight years, Joe, emerged from his man-cave in the basement, his presence filled the room with a sense of warmth and anticipation for the night ahead. “How’s it going, man? Good to see you!” he boomed, clasping Evan in a handshake that was both firm and welcoming, a testament to their longstanding camaraderie.

Joe Bennett’s entrance was as unmistakable as his character; a man who carried the aura of a modern-day Paul Bunyan. Standing at an imposing 6’1”, his broad shoulders and powerful arms spoke volumes of his hard labor as a foreman. His reddish-brown curly hair and matching full beard framed a face that commanded attention, while his piercing blue eyes, thoughtful and observing, revealed a man of depth. Dressed in his practical work attire of jeans, sturdy boots, and plaid shirts, Joe’s presence was both commanding and comforting. With a personality that blended toughness with loyalty, his respect was earned through mutual regard. Joe’s sarcastic humor and occasional moodiness did little to mask his deep adoration for Liz and his unwavering loyalty to friends. A lover of professional sports and off-roading adventures in his 4x4 pickup, Joe’s simple pleasures and dreams mirrored his straightforward, no-nonsense approach to life.

Liz, amidst her bustling preparations, paused as the doorbell’s chime echoed through the house. It was a familiar ritual, yet always a moment filled with anticipation. “That must be Alicia and Abe. Evan, can you answer the door for me?” she called out, her voice threading through the air with a blend of command and warmth.

True to form, Alicia and Abe, an African-American couple known for their blend of sophistication, intellect, and grace, stood at the threshold. Liz always left her door unlocked for the poker party guests, yet the Robinsons, adhering to their conservative values, always rang the doorbell, viewing it as the respectful approach.

Dr. Alicia Robinson, her presence immediately noted for her poised elegance and commanding aura. In her mid-50s, Alicia carried herself with the confidence of someone who had faced life’s challenges head-on and emerged victorious. Her attire, always impeccable, spoke of her refined taste, often favoring stylish yet professional outfits that complemented her role as a highly respected OB/GYN. Alicia’s rich, black hair framed her face, highlighting her expressive brown eyes that flickered with intelligence and warmth. Her stature, neither imposing nor meek, exuded a natural authority.

Liz’s relationship with Alicia evolved from a professional one into a deep friendship. Initially, Liz sought Alicia’s expertise as an OB/GYN specializing in fertility due to Liz’s struggles with getting pregnant and experiencing multiple miscarriages. Despite the ongoing fertility challenges Liz and Joe still faced, the bond between Liz and Alicia grew stronger. Their connection transcended the doctor-patient dynamic, with Alicia becoming a significant source of support and friendship for Liz, marking a shift from medical guidance to personal camaraderie.

Dr. Abe Robinson, a philosophy professor with a towering presence at 6’4”, carried himself with a dignified ease that commanded respect. His dark brown eyes, framed by studious glasses, reflected a depth of knowledge and understanding, mirroring his intellectual pursuits. His black hair, always neatly trimmed, and his preference for suits and ties, even in casual settings, underscored his professional demeanor. Speaking in a slow, thoughtful manner, Abe’s voice added weight to his words, making even the most mundane topics seem profound. His sophisticated delivery could elevate a simple reading into a philosophical discourse.

Evan greeted Abe and Alicia with a handshake, respecting their preference for a more formal acknowledgment. The exchange was brief but filled with mutual respect and understanding. As they made their way into the kitchen.

With his larger-than-life presence, Guido, strode into Liz’s home, the very picture of exuberance and flamboyance. His bulky frame, muscles honed from hours spent in the gym. Draped in gold jewelry that caught the light, his expensive Rolex glinting, Guido’s sun-kissed skin suggested leisure time spent as meticulously as his investments. His boisterous laugh, echoed through the room, brought a vibrancy that was uniquely his.

Guido and Evan’s friendship might have seemed unexpected at first glance, contrasting Evan’s more reserved demeanor with Guido’s larger-than-life presence. From their freshman year as dorm roommates, they shared an unbreakable bond despite their differences. Evan, always thoughtful and composed, found a counterbalance in Guido’s exuberant and assertive personality. Their connection defied the typical friendship model, showcasing a profound understanding and acceptance of each other’s contrasting qualities.

With a demeanor that screamed Jersey Shore despite his actual roots, Guido’s way of speaking was unapologetically bold and streetwise. Some found his edgy vernacular off-putting, but Liz looked beyond that. In Guido, she found the qualities of an honorary younger brother, his seemingly tough shell concealing a true, steadfast loyalty.

Although Alicia and Guido verbally sparred from time to time, they maintained boundaries, respecting Liz and Evan’s fondness for them both, ensuring their bickering never overshadowed the warmth of their gatherings.

“Hey everybody! The Guido is here! I hope you all brought your money because I am feeling lucky tonight!” His voice filled the space, a blend of enthusiasm and challenge that was uniquely his.

Liz’s response to Guido’s entrance was as warm and embracing as ever. “Guido, come give your big sis a hug!” she exclaimed, her affection for him undiminished by his flamboyant entrance. Guido’s response was equally exuberant, lifting Liz in a whirlwind of affection that left her laughing and slightly breathless.

Joe, ever the eager participant, was the first to claim his spot at the poker table. “Let the games begin!” he declared, his voice a mix of excitement and challenge, setting the stage for an evening of camaraderie, competition, and revelation.

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## Scene 11: "Evan Reveals Love, Annually Plan"

As everyone took their usual spots around the poker table, it was clear Evan wasn’t quite ready to join the seated circle. Instead, he stood, energy crackling around him, a sure sign he was gearing up for something more than just a night of cards. The usual banter flowed, with Evan sparking it off with a nudge at Guido, “Before we start taking Guido’s money,” tossing a playful glance his way.

Laughter filled the room as Evan’s remark hit its mark, especially with Guido as the butt of the joke. Guido retorted with equal humor, “Well, prepare yourselves, folks. By the end of the night, it’s your money that will be finding a new home in my wallet!”

As the laughter faded, eyes started to drift back to Evan. It dawned on everyone that he hadn’t just stood up to stretch his legs. Everyone seemed curious, except for Joe, who seemed more interested in the deck of cards in his hand than Evan’s next words. There was a vibe of expectancy in the air, a collective pause as they awaited Evan’s next move.

Evan grinned, “You’re probably wondering why I’m still on my feet. Well, after yet another uninspiring date, I had an epiphany that led to a breakthrough idea I can’t wait to share with all of you!”

Evan, knowing the power of engagement, decided to make his pitch interactive, ditching a straightforward announcement for something that felt more like the beginning of a mystery novel. He kicked things off with a question. “What’s the major pitfall in long-term relationships?” He asked, anxious to see if anyone would venture a guess.

Guido, ever the class clown, quipped, “They end up hating each other.”

Alicia, unable to resist a dig at Guido’s expense, retorted with a straight face, “What would you know? Your idea of a long-term relationship is a three-day weekend.”

Her comment, though not intended to amuse, sent ripples of laughter through the room. Even Guido, usually quick to bounce back with a jest of his own, acknowledged the hit with a chuckle.

“I gotta hand it to you, Alicia, that was a good one!” Guido conceded with a chuckle, admiration in his tone.

Alicia, clearly not swayed by Guido’s praise, turned her focus back to Evan, dismissing the interruption, “Ignore him, Evan. Let’s hear this idea of yours.”

Evan, nodding at Guido’s observation, added, “Well, ‘hating’ might be strong, but you’re not entirely wrong.”

This acknowledgment drew a range of reactions: a smug smile from Guido, indifference from Joe, intrigue from Abe, and looks of astonishment from Liz and Alicia.

Evan, leaning into the conversation with a gravity that quieted the room, shared his findings. “It is well known that the divorce rate in this country is over 50%. Think about it. In this room, only Joe’s parents are still together. Liz and my parents divorced when we were young. Guido and Alicia were raised by single moms, and Abe’s parents divorced later in life.” His voice trailed off, inviting contemplation.

The room fell into a reflective silence, the weight of Evan’s words settling over the group like a heavy blanket. Everyone exchanged glances, acknowledging the truth in Evan’s observation without words. As the moment stretched, they collectively turned back to Evan, their faces a mixture of curiosity and resignation.

Evan, sensing their attention fully back on him, pressed on, “I would estimate that 90% of all committed relationships end in a breakup or divorce.” His statement, bold and a bit unsettling, hung in the air.

Liz, ever the optimist and perhaps a bit defensive about the sanctity of relationships, couldn’t help but challenge him. “Evan, that’s nonsense. 90%? Really?” Disbelief tinged her voice, her eyebrows arching in skepticism.

Unfazed, Evan had a question at the ready. “Can anyone guess how many people are registered on dating or hookup sites?” His gaze swept the room, inviting speculation.

Liz, slightly irked by the direction of the conversation but engaged nonetheless, ventured a guess. “I don’t know, Evan - a million?”

Evan, eager to share his findings and perhaps sway his sister’s opinion, corrected her with emphasis, “Conservatively, tens and tens and tens of millions.” He repeated ‘tens’ for emphasis, his eyes alight with the thrill of revelation.

Liz, still struggling to wrap her mind around the figures, expressed her skepticism. “That can’t be right.”

But Evan stood firm, bolstered by his research. “It’s true, I researched it last night.”

Guido, voiced his admiration. “My boy did his homework!”

Evan, not missing a beat, continued with his train of thought. “With a few cringy exceptions, that means, like me, those tens of millions of website members have a 100% failure rate.” His statement, bold and a bit unsettling, seemed to echo in the quiet of the room.

Abe, nodded thoughtfully. “I think you’re right about that, Evan. I often hear the students at the University discussing their experiences with online dating. I would venture to guess that if you polled the students in my classes, the vast majority are currently or were recently members of a dating site.” His deep voice carried the weight of experience, lending credibility to Evan’s argument.

“Exactly! And that doesn’t even count the number of single people not using the web to find a partner.” Evan said. His eyes sparkled with the excitement of sharing his insights, his hands gesturing broadly to encompass the gravity of his statement.

Guido, unable to resist injecting his own brand of humor into the conversation, quipped with a smirk, “I have a feeling we have some more stats coming our way!” His comment, though made in jest, acknowledged Evan’s characteristic thoroughness and penchant for detail.

Evan, momentarily pausing to scratch his head, sighed. “When I think about all the couples I’ve known over the years, it feels like half of them aren’t exactly living the dream. They stay together for the kids, convenience, financial concerns, or dread the idea of starting over. That leaves only 5% of relationships that I would consider healthy.” His voice trailed off, a hint of sadness tinging his words as he contemplated the state of modern relationships.

Liz, feeling a mix of defensiveness and pride, couldn’t help but respond. “What about the couples in this room? Our relationships are thriving!” Her tone carried a note of challenge, a testament to her belief in the strength of the bonds around her.

Evan, navigating the delicate balance of his next words, offered a gentle disclaimer. “I agree. I don’t want to offend anyone, but I can’t think of even one long-term relationship with energy matching levels when the relationship began. Most relationships peak within their first year– infamously known as the ‘honeymoon phase’.” He hesitated, a thoughtful look crossing his face, aware that Liz was on the edge of her seat, perhaps ready to counter his next words. Sensing the tension, he decided not to dive deeper into the potentially contentious part of his theory.

Shifting his gaze to the distance, Evan’s expression softened, a dreamlike quality entering his voice. “There’s nothing quite like the first magical year getting to know someone. A time where everything feels fresh - the first kiss, the excitement of holding hands, the initial rush of exploring intimacy together, discovering new places to eat, maybe even that first trip away.” He paused, lost for a moment in the reminiscence of such times, a wistful smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

But the mood shifted as Evan’s voice took on a somber tone, his gaze lowering to the floor. “But then, over time, everything shifts. It’s like couples just stop trying. The spark goes out, they argue more, and that thrill of seeing each other fades away, sometimes disappearing entirely. Next thing you know, they are breaking up, signing divorce papers, and ending up with...” He trailed off, the weight of the words too personal, too heavy, before lifting his eyes to meet those of his audience. “...a whole lot of heartache.” The room hung on his every word, a collective empathy in the air. “Even the best of couples can’t seem to keep up the energy from their first year together.” The reality of his statement seemed to settle over the room, a mix of agreement and contemplation in the eyes of his family and friends.

Alicia chimed in, her voice carrying the weight of wisdom and personal experience. “Let’s not forget, Evan, everyone’s love story is unique. Abe and I, we might not be all over each other like we just met, but our connection runs deep, built on respect. That includes respecting the long hours and the sacrifices we both make for our careers.” Her words, sincere and heartfelt, resonated in the room, offering a different perspective on love.

Abe, always the philosopher, shared his thoughts with a calm, measured tone. “Evan, I’ve listened with an open mind, and you make some compelling points. However, trying to keep life at a perpetual climax? That’s a puzzle no one can solve. Humans, like all creatures, aren’t meant for endless peaks.” His words, steeped in wisdom, seemed to echo through the room, challenging Evan’s premise with gentle authority.

Liz, caught in a moment of self-reflection, sighed deeply, a mix of frustration and resignation in her voice. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but Joe and I have let things slide between us far too often. After a grueling day, it’s too tempting to just veg out. We end up ordering in and binge-watching our favorite shows instead of really connecting with each other.” Her admission, raw and honest, struck a chord with everyone present.

Evan, his voice tinged with regret, quickly reassured his sister. “Liz, I didn’t mean to make anyone feel bad, least of all you.” His words were sincere, a brother’s concern breaking through the tension of the conversation.

Liz, her tone softening, “I get it, you weren’t pointing fingers. Yes, that early thrill of a new relationship has settled down with me and Joe. But it’s been replaced by something so much stronger. My relationship with Joe is rooted in the only thing that counts - love. These roots run deep and are strong, not only because of life’s greatest joys, but also because of life’s toughest challenges. With all your talk of numbers and percentages, you have left love out of the equation.” Her words were a testament to the depth of her commitment, a beacon of hope amidst Evan’s bleak outlook.

Evan, the hurt visible in his eyes and body language, responded with a voice laced with resignation. “I didn’t factor in love because, for me, love’s off the table. You get one shot at true love. I had mine, and now it’s lost forever.” The room fell into a stunned silence, the pain of Evan’s admission leaving a heavy air of sympathy and concern.

Liz, moved by her brother’s vulnerability, wrapped him in a warm hug before stepping back, her eyes shining with care and love. “You’re young, wonderful, and handsome. Love will find its way back to you.” Her words, filled with hope and belief, sought to mend the cracks in Evan’s broken heart.

Evan, with a rare flash of irritation, rebuffed, “Oh really, Liz?”

Raising his voice to ensure he was heard, Evan called out, “Hey, Joe.” Joe glanced up from the deck of cards he was shuffling. With Joe’s full attention, Evan posed a pointed question. “Joe, in the unlikely event things with Liz come to an end, do you envision another woman in your future?”

Joe didn’t hesitate, his reply ringing with conviction. “Not a chance! Liz is my everything. There’s no one else for me.”

Evan turned back to Liz, pressing on, “And Liz, if you and Joe didn’t make it, is there someone else who could take his place?”

Liz, clearly agitated by Evan’s line of questioning, responded, “Evan, that’s not fair to ask.”

Evan stood firm, “It’s the fairest question of all. Look around; the couples in this room found their once-in-a-lifetime love and clung to it. If I still had my true love, I’d be content with those quiet nights in, embracing every high and low life throws at us, as long as we faced it together.”

Liz felt a rare irritation bubbling up. It was unusual for Evan to counter every suggestion she made with such persistence. His readiness to challenge her at every turn was both surprising and unsettling.

Alicia, noticing the tension building in Liz, sought to steer the discussion in a more productive direction: “Evan, what’s the endpoint of all this? You mentioned having an epiphany that sparked a breakthrough idea?”

“This isn’t just a breakthrough; it’s a revolution in dating. Keeping it to ourselves might be a crime against single people everywhere,” Evan proclaimed, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

Alicia’s intervention proved effective, pulling Evan back from the brink of despondency. Revitalized, the initial zeal with which Evan began the discussion made a comeback, signaling he was primed to divulge both his revelation and his novel approach to relationships.

Evan, his voice gaining the cadence of a seasoned storyteller, began, “So, there I was, driving home last night, just glad to have the date behind me. Yet, I couldn’t help but replay every moment of it in my head. The woman I was with? She was undeniably attractive, intelligent, and had a great sense of humor. Despite her being so great, the thought of a second date didn’t even cross my mind.”

Guido chimed in with his trademark blend of jest and a sliver of sincerity, “I’ll happily take her off your hands. Shoot me her number, will ya?”

Alicia, seizing the moment to land a playful jab at Guido, retorted, “Dream on, Guido. She’s way out of your league. Remember, Evan mentioned she’s intelligent.” The room erupted in laughter, marking the second time Alicia’s quick wit won the crowd over.

Guido, conceding with a grin, acknowledged, “I’ve got to hand it to you, Alicia. You’re really on fire tonight!”

Evan, steering the conversation back to his revelation, continued, “Reflecting on the countless dates from the past year, I realized something. While a few were outright disasters and others simply fell flat, the majority were decent dates. And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to see them again. It was during this reflection I had my epiphany. Deep down, I knew these relationships were doomed to fail or become unsatisfying. More significantly, I finally accepted the fact that there was zero chance the relationship would result in true love.”

Liz, her voice laced with concern and a hint of desperation for Evan to view things from a brighter perspective, softly exclaimed, “Oh, Evan.”

Abe, unexpectedly finding himself drawn into Evan’s narrative, inquired with genuine interest, “So, what breakthrough idea did this epiphany lead to?”

Evan, unable to contain his anticipation, began energetically rubbing his hands together as if to warm up for the grand finale. “I’m glad you asked,” he said, a spark of excitement lighting his eyes. “After coming to terms with the impossibility of ever finding true love again, it dawned on me that there might be another way to capture something nearly as fulfilling!”

Alicia leaned forward, intrigued. “And what’s this ‘next best thing’?”

Grinning from ear to ear, Evan dove right in. “Well, since dating’s been a bust and finding ‘the one’ a second time is nothing more than a fairytale, I thought of something kinda out there. Why not find someone cool? Not just a pretty face, but someone I would like hanging out with. Since relationships are often all fireworks in the first year, why not make a plan to just enjoy that ride for a year? Then, when the year is over, call it quits while things are still good, avoiding all that mess when things start to go downhill.”

With his idea now fully revealed, Evan’s gaze swept across the room, searching for a hint of shared excitement. Instead, he was met with expressions ranging from perplexed to utterly astonished. Notably, Liz’s reaction was the most striking to Evan; her features frozen in a state of sheer astonishment.

Liz, couldn’t mask her disbelief. “Let me get this straight. Your grand scheme is to date a girl for a year and then dump her? What girl is going to go for that?”

Evan, feeling his intentions were being misconstrued, clarified, “It’s not about ‘dating’ for a year, Liz. It’s about sharing a meaningful relationship for that time. But yes, finding someone agreeable to such a proposition might be a challenge.”

Alicia, chiming in with a dose of reality, pointed out, “Evan, any woman worth spending a year with isn’t going to sign up for an expiration date on the relationship.”

Evan conceded, “You’re right, Alicia. Which is why I wouldn’t be able to disclose the full scope of my plan upfront. Besides, it could tarnish the Vaughn Foundation’s reputation if it ever got out that I’m going around asking women to be in a relationship of this kind.”

Liz couldn’t help but respond with a hint of sarcasm, “You think?”

Evan leaned forward, a crease of concern etching his brow as he grappled with the ethical dilemma of his plan. “I don’t feel great about not being able to disclose my plan upfront,” he confessed, his voice tinged with unease. “But, I think I’ve found a way to compensate for the deceit and the hurt that an unexpected breakup might cause.”

Liz raised an eyebrow, skepticism shadowing her features. “And how do you propose to manage that?”

Evan met her gaze, his expression earnest, a spark of hope flickering in his eyes. “Abe made a great point about people not equipped to live at constant emotional highs. Considering it’s just for a year, I plan to be ‘the world’s best boyfriend’—attentive, caring, supportive, ensuring her every need is met. I know that’s something I can commit to for a year.”

Liz folded her arms, unconvinced. “So, you believe being Mr. Perfect for a year makes up for the heartbreak of a blindside breakup?” she challenged, her voice rising slightly.

Evan nodded, his conviction not faltering. “Yes, I genuinely believe that. If a woman were to truly consider it, I think many would accept a moment of heartache in exchange for a year of being treated well,” he reasoned, trying to gauge his sister’s reaction.

Liz, her affection for her brother evident despite her opposition to his plan, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Evan, you’re my brother, and I understand this is coming from a place of pain and loneliness,” she said softly, her voice imbued with warmth yet firm with resolve. “But I cannot, in good conscience, stand by and watch you go through with such a ridiculous plan.”

Guido, unable to remain a mere spectator any longer. “Look, Evan’s approach might be a bit out there, but calling it ridiculous? That’s a stretch.”

Liz, eyebrows knitted in confusion and disbelief, turned to Guido. “How on earth can you defend this? Even if I wanted to support him, there’s no way this plan could ever succeed. Evan, you despise lying, and you’re bad at it. Any woman would see right through this in a heartbeat.”

Evan massaged his temples. “I’ve been wrestling with this idea, thinking it through from every angle. Then It dawned on me. I wouldn’t have to lie per se—just avoid revealing my plan to breakup after a year.”

Liz, shaking her head in disapproval: “Come on, Evan. You know better than that. The whole relationship would be one big lie.”

The weight of Liz’s disappointment was a tangible force, pressing uncomfortably against Evan’s chest. He knew she was right, yet admitting his desperation wasn’t something he was prepared to do—not here, not in front of everyone. He struggled internally, his unspoken thoughts a whirlwind. But Liz, I’m at my wit’s end. Do I become like Guido, hopping from one bed to another? I’m done with dating; it’s just not for me. What choices do I have left? My only options are to resign myself to solitude or go ahead with this plan.

Seeing Evan struggle, Guido stepped in to support his friend: “Liz, I think you’re being a bit harsh. Everybody holds back something in a relationship – especially at the beginning. The dating world is all about people presenting their best selves, not their real selves. Evan’s not planning to lie; he’s just focusing on being the best partner he can be. Not because he has to but because he wants to. That is Evan’s real self and there is no lie in that.”

Liz, her voice laced with concern and a softening demeanor, responded: “But can’t you see how that will make it harder on the poor girl? She’ll be left heartbroken, wondering why everything so perfect ended so suddenly.”

Guido, never one to shy away from a debate—even with Liz, whom he respected deeply—countered: “So what you’re saying, Liz, is that Evan will never find true love again?”

Liz was caught off guard by Guido’s response. The air was thick with puzzled glances, leaving the room in a state of perplexed silence as everyone, including Evan, pondered the underlying message in Guido’s challenge.

Alicia, visibly upset and rising to Liz’s defense, snapped: Liz didn’t say that, Guido! Don’t twist her words.”

Guido, with a hint of mischief yet making a point, retorted: “I’m just going by what I heard. It seemed pretty clear to me.”

Liz, trying to keep the peace, interjected: “Calm down you two. Guido, why would you think I’m saying Evan’s never gonna find true love again?”

Guido’s voice laced with conviction, “You’re assuming it’ll end in a breakup after a year, right?”

Liz, perplexed yet intrigued by where Guido was leading, nodded, “That’s the plan, isn’t it?”

As the conversation unfolded, Guido shared his perspective on the unpredictable nature of relationships, emphasizing that every love story begins shrouded in uncertainty. He asserted that even the most thought-out plans for a relationship seldom pan out as expected. Guido suggested to Liz that Evan would probably fall in love with the first girl he tried this relationship plan with and a breakup would likely never happen.

Evan was irked by Guido’s suggestion, Guido’s nuts, I’m never going to fall in love again. Evan’s annoyance with Guido’s claims gave way to feeling a trace of hope as he noticed Liz’s expression soften. Look at Liz’s face! Is she finally starting to come around? This hint of acceptance from Liz introduced a sliver of hope to Evan’s rigid outlook, suggesting that the path of his planned relationship might not be as predetermined as he thought.

Evan, seizing what he perceived as an opening in Liz’s skepticism, ventured further. “Liz, think about it. If there’s even the smallest chance I could stumble upon love again, wouldn’t this approach be better than the endless string of go-nowhere dates? It’s either I discover someone to grow old with, or I enjoy a year of something meaningful before it inevitably ends. I need you in my corner on this one. Can’t you see it’s worth a shot?”

Liz’s response was a contemplative silence, her thoughts evidently churning.

In Liz’s silence, Evan saw a crack in the armor and turned up the sibling charm. “Liz, I’m begging here. I really think this could be good for me. I can’t do this without your support. Please, for your baby brother?” He urged, his child-like smile disarmingly sweet.

Liz’s response was nonverbal, her departure to another room leaving a suspenseful silence in her wake. Her silence left Evan wondering if his words had pushed too hard or swayed her heart.

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## Scene 12: "Love, Annually Gets a Rulebook"

Liz came back with a notebook and pen, her face showing she meant business. She was ready to back Evan’s wild idea, but she was going to make sure they did it her way.

Liz, half rolling her eyes but serious, said, “Evan, I gotta say, I think this whole thing is nuts. But I can see you’re dead set on it. If you want me in your corner, we’re gonna need some ground rules to keep you, and any lady you rope into this plan, safe. I’m only on board if you promise to follow the rules we lay out, okay?”

Evan, practically bouncing with enthusiasm, shot up and wrapped Liz in a side hug, planting a firm, playful, brotherly smooch on her cheek. “You got it! Thanks a bunch, Liz! You’re the best!”

Liz, ready to take charge, chimed in, “We’ve got some smart cookies here tonight. Let’s put our heads together and come up with a few guidelines. I’ll kick things off. Just so you know, I’m only going along with this because I’m betting if you actually fall for someone, you won’t want to split after just a year.”

Liz, with a slight shake of her head and a soft sigh, seemed to be trying to convince herself more than anyone else. “I suppose, if you’re not in love with the woman, a breakup would be inevitable anyway,” she said, trying to find a silver lining.

Taking charge with an air of authority, her voice firm yet open to collaboration. “So, here’s the deal—Rule #1: As you’ve already hinted, be the partner she deserves, full of care and attention, from start to finish. Rule #2: Unless she presents some sort of danger, once you’re in, you’re in for a year, no backing out, even if she’s not the dream girl you hoped for. You’ve got to be Mr. Perfect, no matter what. And Rule #3,” she paused for effect, “If things aren’t going well, you may not try and circumvent the first two rules by intentionally trying to get her to break up with you. These rules are designed to ensure you think long and hard before diving in. These are the ground rules, non-debatable. Who’s up for adding more?”

Joe, eager to contribute and perhaps a tad keen to impress Liz, was the first to volunteer. “I’ll go,” he said, raising his hand. “There may be hard feelings after the breakup. I think it’s a good idea you don’t date anyone who lives too close to this area. You don’t want to run into her at the grocery store or some restaurant after the relationship ends.” He leaned back, nodding at his own logic. “Rule #4 should be that she lives at least 45 minutes away in light traffic.”

Liz nodded, scribbling away. “Excellent thought, Joe. Evan, you cool with that?”

Evan’s enthusiasm was unmistakable. “Absolutely!” he chimed in, his spirits lifted. The rules, far from being restrictions, sparked a sense of adventure and caution in him, a balance he hadn’t realized he needed.

Alicia’s voice, carrying both concern and authority. “Evan, you know how easily you get attached to children, and I think children should not be involved in this. Rule #5 should be to exclude single mothers as potential relationship partners.”

Evan nodded, his expression one of genuine gratitude. “Good point! I hadn’t even thought about that. You’re so right, Alicia. Thank you,” he said, acknowledging the wisdom in her words.

Alicia nodded, pleased with Evan’s understanding, and turned her attention to the next in line. “You’re welcome, Evan. Abe, do you have anything to add?”

Abe, who had been quietly observing the discussion, finally spoke up. “I’m not sure if this is more than one rule, but you cannot treat this as a normal relationship. Typically, you’d integrate into her friends and family circle and vice versa. You would be putting us in a tough position if she joined our inner circle. And the closer you get to her friends and family, which may include young nieces and nephews, the more heartache there will be when the relationship ends. I would say rule #6 should be you limit your exposure to her inner circle and limit her exposure to us.”

Liz, reflecting on her brother’s tender heart towards children and their own family’s past, added her thoughts. “Evan, it’s important that you adhere to these rules regarding children. Not just for their benefit but for yours. I know how much you love kids. If you entered a relationship with a single mom, I worry you would stay with her even if you didn’t love her, just to protect her kids from the pain a breakup would cause. I never want you to settle for anything but true love.”

Evan, feeling a surge of gratitude towards his tight-knit group, chimed in with genuine warmth. “Big thanks to you, Abe. Liz, this rule-making session’s brilliant. Saved me from a total faceplant. Guido, your turn—lay it on us,” he said, leaning back, a spark of mischief in his eyes, awaiting Guido’s unpredictable contribution.

Guido, usually the life of any gathering with his humor and antics, approached the topic with an unexpected seriousness. “Liz made it pretty tough on you with those first three rules. I’d be terrified to make any commitment where I was stuck for a year if I didn’t like the girl. There should be a time limit on how long you have to decide on a year-long commitment. You don’t wanna drag the girl along indefinitely. Rule #7 should be; if you’re not ready to commit to a year together after four weeks of getting to know her, you end the relationship at that time. Fish or cut bait, buddy.”

Liz’s approval was swift and sincere. “That’s actually a solid idea, Guido,” she acknowledged, her words drawing a modest grin from Guido—a rare departure from his usual overconfident smirk.

Evan, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, weighed in. “But what if I’m ready to commit before the month’s up?”

Guido, surprising even himself with the depth of his contributions, clarified his thought. “You can start a relationship whenever you want, as long as you’re willing to follow Liz’s other rules. That gives me an idea for another rule. Unless you want to turn into someone like me, I think rule #8 should be if you sleep with them at any time in the first four weeks, then your year starts at that moment. This way, you don’t end up in a series of one-night stands.” His words carried a blend of jest and wisdom, indicative of his complex personality that often hid behind a facade of humor.

Evan nodded, his expression earnest. “I’m on board with that. If things get intimate, the year-long commitment begins.” His agreement was punctuated with a resolve that mirrored his desire to distance himself from Guido’s cavalier approach to relationships, aiming instead for something more meaningful and sustained.

`Alicia, putting herself in the shoes of a woman who might end up getting hurt by Evan’s plan, raised a new point. “We must consider how difficult this will be for her. If you’re relationship is going great and then suddenly it’s over, that’s going to hit hard. How about planning the breakup for the Friday after your year’s up, so she’s got the weekend to start getting over it? But really, the key here is being flexible. If she’s got something big coming up, you wait it out. Break it off when it’s gonna be the least rough on her,” she suggested, her voice full of concern.

Liz, immediately seeing the wisdom in Alicia’s idea, agreed. “Being able to pick the right time to end things, that’s crucial. Evan, you’ve gotta be as gentle as you can when it’s time to say goodbye. Let’s call that rule #9. And for the last rule,” Liz added, her tone softening, “I’m really hoping you fall for the first girl you try this with. But if things don’t work out, you should take a break before seeing someone new. How about a two-month gap before you start dating again? That’s rule #10.”

Evan was all smiles, grateful for the feedback and the brainstorming. “Thanks a ton, everyone. This talk’s been a real eye-opener. I’m ready to give this a shot with these rules backing me up,” he said, his voice full of optimism.

Liz looked around, her expression softening as she took in the faces of her friends and family. “Hey, everyone, big thanks for helping out with this. It means a lot, really.” She shot Evan a playful yet stern look. “And Evan, just so we’re clear, I’m only backing you on this if you follow our rules to the T. Slip up, and you’re flying solo, got it?”

Evan’s eyes twinkled with a mix of amusement and respect. “You’re the boss!”

Liz gave a light chuckle, easing the seriousness of her warning. “Okay, I’ll get these rules all neat and hand copies of them out to everyone before the night ends. Go ahead and start the poker game without me. I’ve got a bit of work to finish up here.”

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## Scene 13: "Official Rules and Guidelines"

Evan’s Relationship Rules

Rule #1

Evan must be a caring and attentive partner for the duration of the relationship. A.k.a. “The World’s Greatest Boyfriend.”

Rule #2

Once Evan decides to commit to the year-long relationship, he is bound to these rules for the entire year. Evan cannot break up early unless the woman presents a danger to him.

Rule #3

Evan cannot try to get the woman to break up with him. Rule #1 still applies even if Evan becomes disenchanted with the relationship.

Rule #4

Evan can only date women who live a minimum of a 45-minute drive away in light traffic.

Rule #5

Evan cannot date single mothers.

Rule #6

Evan will do his best to avoid integrating into the woman’s inner circle and do his best to prevent her from integrating into his inner circle.

Rule #7

Evan has four weeks from the day of their first meeting to commit to the one-year relationship. If Evan is not ready to make that commitment, he must end the relationship.

Rule #8

If Evan engages in physical intimacy with the woman in the first four weeks, the year-long commitment starts automatically, and Evan is fully bound to the rules at that point.

Rule #9

Evan must try to choose the least inconvenient time to end the relationship. The default day will be the first Friday after their year together has been completed. If needed, Evan may reschedule to a later date.

Rule #10

Once the year-long relationship has ended, Evan must wait two months before dating again.

# Chapter 3: "The Universe Delivers"

## Scene 14: "Evan Gets Signs From the Universe"

Evan bounced as he exited the shower, a grin permanently plastered on his face. Excitement hummed through him, stronger than the night he’d spilled his whole dating plan to his friends. He practically skipped into his closet, whistling off-key. This. This was the day it was all going to fall into place.

His morning had been a perfect string of green lights: a record-breaking run, the gym weights felt like feathers, and a buzzer-beating win to finish off a lunchtime basketball game. As he reached into the closet, eyes closed, a laugh bubbled up in his throat. The last thing to go wrong today would be his outfit. With a flourish, he pulled out a shirt – and of course, it was the right one. The radio chimed in then, a feel-good anthem - “Perfect Day” by Hoku.

For a moment, he just listened, feeling the upbeat pulse match his own. Those lyrics – they weren’t just background noise. They were a promise. On this perfect day, nothing’s standing in my way...A surge of certainty washed over him. This was it. On this perfect day, when nothing can go wrong...

The Universe was lining things up, leading him straight toward a chance at...something. Not grand romance, that ship had sailed long ago. But maybe something good enough to prove his whole crazy plan had merit. Today wasn’t wishful thinking; it was...a shot at something different

Evan scanned the list of rules Liz had printed out for him. Rule #4 in particular had stuck with him: his potential partner in his new plan had to live at least 45 minutes away. With determination, he opted to embark on a spontaneous journey, His plan was simple: drive until he reached the 45-minute mark, then start seeking signs guiding him to his destined encounter.

Out west he went, I-88 his ticket to adventure… well, at least adventure of the non-epic-love variety. With any luck, this would be the last solo road trip for a while. His SUV cruised along, an extension of his eager energy. Music flooded the space, windows down to catch the summer air. No honking horns or stop-and-go today, the Tollway stretching ahead, echoing with possibilities. His sunglasses mirrored the cloudless sky.

Then, like clockwork, it all went sideways. Construction signs loomed, traffic grinding to a crawl. Even construction cones weren’t going to stop him now. Instead, Evan found himself strangely...calm. It felt like some grand test, a speed bump to filter out the half-committed. If the Universe really had his back, this was meant to lead him somewhere special. Or… at least somewhere far enough away.

No time to think, time to act. Spotting an exit ramp, he veered off. He found himself pulling into a town square gas station, energy drink less of a crave and more an excuse to move. A sudden urge, source unknown, guided Evan’s attention to the storefront window – and bam! A colorful poster slapped him awake: Autumn Festival, Live Music, Naperville Riverwalk. There was that word again: live. Something sparked, a feeling more than logic. It looked fun, full of people, and wasn’t that the whole point of this crazy plan? Suddenly the traffic jam felt like a shove in the right direction. Fate’s GPS was a little messy, but hey, he always said to expect the unexpected…

 Evan parked in the downtown Naperville garage, the unfamiliar surroundings amplifying the butterflies in his stomach. Not that those nerves would’ve shown – at least he hoped they wouldn’t. This wasn’t about exuding Guido-style swagger when approaching women he’d never met. But even an ounce of that easy confidence sure would’ve been welcome right about now. How exactly did one go about spotting their one-year-and-done soul mate in a crowd? Did fate issue matching t-shirts, or was he supposed to get some sort of mystical vibe?

An annoyed chuckle bubbled up. Okay, so cosmic guidance wasn’t his strong suit. He’d always liked things straight-up, predictable. Still, this whole experiment was about trying something different, wasn’t it? Liz’s voice resonated in his memory, calm, steady: “If it’s meant to be, it will be.” An odd warmth flooded through him – more reassuring than his typical dose of skepticism. Liz had a way of cutting through the anxiety, reminding him that effort itself had value. Hey, if nothing else, it would make for a hell of a story…

The moment he stepped outside, the energy shift hit him – not like a tidal wave, but a steady undercurrent of excitement buzzing beneath the surface. This wasn’t his comfort zone, not by a long shot. But he wasn’t backing down; if there was even a sliver of a chance on this wild goose chase, he was gonna find it. With each stride, Liz’s refrain pulsed alongside his heartbeat: “If it’s meant to be…” Let the fun begin.

As Evan navigated the town square towards the festival’s entrance, a blur of people, boutiques, and cafés melted away. Suddenly, amidst the chaos, it was as if a spotlight shone down upon a single detail. There she was: a flash of auburn hair unlike any he’d ever encountered - vibrant as the richest hues adorning the trees overhead, yet radiating a warmth that only life could possess. The vibrant blend danced beneath the sunlight, echoing the golden shades of fading leaves while hinting at an inner glow all her own. That must be her. Her unique hair color, mirroring the vibrancy of nature’s autumn canvas, wasn’t simply a sign - her incandescent beacon of hair signaling the Universe was hand-picking his unwitting companion who would accompany him on an uncharted course.

Now, about actually doing something with this cosmic directive…A knot formed in his stomach. Gone was the bravado of his drive, replaced by the awkward reality of walking up to a stranger. Yet, beneath the panic, another wave crashed over him: excitement. This wasn’t some bar, some generic meet-cute territory. This was the start of something… something he had no script for. Excuses swirled through his mind – wait until they look up, pretend someone called his name… Pathetic. With gritted teeth, he forced himself forward, every step against his usual instincts.

Focus. Listen. Maybe something they talked about could give him an ‘in,’ a reason to approach beyond dumbstruck gawking. It seemed wrong to eavesdrop, yet the words floated to him on the breeze.

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## Scene 15: "Maggie’s Dating Woes"

The crisp autumn air swirled with the tantalizing aroma of pumpkin lattes as Maggie and Laura sat nestled at an outdoor table in front of a quaint café. A flurry of crimson and golden leaves danced in the fading light, the remnants of the day’s vibrant festival lingering in the vibrant glow. Laura’s eyes sparkled with an unbridled excitement that contrasted starkly with Maggie’s own subdued gaze.

Laura leaned forward, her tone a blend of concern and gentle rebuke. “Maggie, you’re missing out on so much. You don’t even try to date anymore.”

Maggie’s gaze slowly returned to her friend. She offered a wan smile, the effort evident in the lines around her eyes. “Dating? With my schedule? Impossible.”

A fleeting frown creased Laura’s brow. “There’s always room for a bit of fun. You’re working yourself to the bone.”

Maggie let out a soft sigh, her shoulders slumping slightly. “Honestly, why bother? The online scene is a bust, and the one guy I actually liked left because I was too busy. It’s just too much hassle.”

Laura’s voice held a note of desperation. “Isn’t there someone from one of your jobs you could casually see?”

A trace of weariness crossed Maggie’s features. “Tried that. It was a complete mess.”

Laura pressed relentlessly. “Surely there’s got to be someone catching your eye, somewhere, anywhere?”

Laura’s plea seemed to echo through the crowd, reaching ears beyond their own. A figure lingering just out of sight felt a strange jolt of recognition in her words.

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## Scene 16: "Evan Meets Maggie"

Laura’s words burned in his mind – surely there must be someone catching her eye? This could be his chance, the sign from the Universe he’d hoped for, yet doubt gnawed at his resolve. A mix of nerves and reckless courage warred on his handsome face, his steps faltering. He could still turn and walk away, pretending he’d never heard. But then regret would be his companion. With a quick breath, he banished the hesitation, offering a smile that was both charming and hinted at a sliver of apology. It was time to take a risk.

Mustering a disarming air of confidence that barely masked his nerves, Evan casually strolled over to their table, plopped into the empty chair, and inquired with light humor, “Might I throw my hat in the ring?”

A delighted grin spread across Laura’s face. She nudged Maggie playfully with her elbow, eyes sparkling with mischievous amusement as she countered, “For what, exactly?”

Evan’s smile widened, revealing a hint of boyish charm. “Forgive me. I’m being incredibly rude,” he admitted with a playful flourish. He inclined his head slightly in a mock bow. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Evan.”

Laura responded with an enthusiastic beam, extending a hand in a welcoming gesture. “I’m Laura.”

Evan’s warmth softened as he turned to Maggie, his gaze unwavering as he offered his hand and inquired, “And you are?”

A soft smile touched Maggie’s lips, her hesitation only adding to her allure as she replied, “Maggie.”

Evan leaned forward, his voice a compelling mix of mystery and sincerity. “Sorry for butting in. I overheard a bit of your chat and felt compelled to join in. This will sound odd, but I believe destiny led me here. May I share why?”

Laura’s eyes lit up with a twinkle of excitement as she declared, “We are all ears!” She turned towards Maggie, who met her gaze with an expression that was a blend of surprise and amusement. Perhaps there was a hint of resignation in the slight upturn of her lips, a silent acknowledgment that, well...they might as well hear this stranger out.

Evan paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “I’ve experienced similar frustrations with online dating. Just last night, I told my sister and friends I’m done with online dating, and I’m going to try something new. I woke up this morning feeling inspired.” His voice rose, infused with a newfound determination.

“I chose to let fate decide who I’d meet today. Started my journey in Highland Park and just drove west, letting the cosmos guide me.” A touch of humor crept into his voice as he recounted, “When traffic ground to a halt, I saw it as a nudge to exit. At a gas station, a poster for the fall festival caught my eye. It felt like the Universe was pointing me there.”

Leaning in conspiratorially, he continued, “With all these people around, I wondered how I’d know who I was looking for. But when I saw your beautiful red hair, almost the same color as the leaves this time of year, I considered it a sign that we were meant to meet tonight.”

Laura burst forth with an exclamation of delight. “It’s spectacular, isn’t it? The color of her hair is all-natural. I keep saying she should trademark it!”

Evan’s sincerity shone through as he addressed Maggie directly. “It’s mesmerizing. Once I spotted you, I knew. The hard part was gathering the nerve to approach. Laura’s question seemed like the Universe giving me the final push.”

A hesitant smile touched Maggie’s lips. “Quite the tale you’ve spun.” There was a hint of friendly skepticism laced within her tone.

Laura, ever the optimist, beamed. “A captivating story, indeed!”

A server’s sudden appearance punctuated the scene, interrupting their flow. “Can I get you anything?”

A trace of uncertainty crossed Evan’s face before he responded, his confidence faltering slightly. “I was just leaving, actually.”

Evan shifted uncomfortably, sensing his confidence waning. “I can feel my nerve slipping away, but before I go, I just want to leave this with you.” He extended his business card. “There’s a bit about me on our website. Maggie, if you’re up for it, I’d really enjoy your company at the fall festival tonight. Laura, you’re more than welcome to join us. You could be our chaperone!” He forced a chuckle and gestured towards the two of them. “I’ll swing back here in about an hour, okay? If you decide it’s a yes, great. If not, no hard feelings, and I hope you both have a wonderful evening regardless.”

Maggie met his gaze with hesitant warmth. “You seem like a great guy, Evan. We’ll see. But I can’t promise anything. Life’s a bit chaotic for me right now.”

Evan lowered his voice, meeting Maggie’s gaze with a soft sincerity. “I can see you’re hesitant, and honestly, I get it. So am I. Even taking that first step toward your table, I was terrified. Heck, I am still scared.” A gentle grin, mirrored by both Maggie and Laura, hinted at a shared understanding. “Bad dates, broken promises...they can leave you feeling like all that risk isn’t worth it. I can’t make you any promises about where this will go. I wish I could. Nor do I expect any promises from you. But whatever the reason, I woke up this morning with a certainty I haven’t felt in a long time – that I would meet a woman I’d want to get to know and spend time with. And somehow, here you are. Maybe this goes nowhere, or maybe we’ll enjoy getting to know each other. But it seems a shame to let that chance pass us by, doesn’t it?”

A touch of warmth kindled in the depths of Maggie’s eyes. His words were unexpected, so different from the initial approach that struck her as mere boldness. This vulnerability was…disarming. I’ve never met a man willing to admit he was afraid, she realized with a small jolt of surprise. A tentative smile touched her lips, a mixture of curiosity and a sliver of the hope he’d so cleverly reawakened in her. Perhaps for just this one night, surrendering to the whim of the moment didn’t feel quite so reckless. Still, a familiar hesitation lingered in her gaze...one final wall she wasn’t quite ready to dismantle.

Evan leaned forward with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Think about it, Maggie. Instead of telling your friends tomorrow about some boring online date…” He playfully stretched his arms into a massive yawn, barely containing a laugh. “...I’m yawning just thinking about it.”

A wide grin spread across his face. “Instead of boring them with yet another description of an uninteresting first date, you can tell them you had a great time at the fall festival with a man the Universe delivered right to your table! Not too many women get that kind of service, you know.”

Laura chimed in with a playful smirk, “He’s right! Women never get that kind of service!”

A wry grin spread across Evan’s face. “My courage has abandoned me. I’ll leave you two to enjoy your dinner.” He paused, casting a final, hopeful glance toward Maggie. “Fingers crossed you’re here when I return.”

Hoping to get a chuckle, Evan playfully walked off with an exaggerated, awkward swagger. He couldn’t resist turning back briefly, offering a playful nod as if to say, “Pretty cool, right?”. His antics drew hearty laughter from both women, who shook their heads in amused disbelief. Evan pretended to be wounded by their reaction. With a dramatic pout, he shuffled away, leaving an indelible mark on the evening.

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## Scene 17: "Laura and Maggie Google Evan"

Maggie’s fork clattered against her plate, the bite of pasta abandoned mid-air. “Can you believe that just happened!?” Her eyes were wide, mirroring her own astonishment.

Laura beamed, leaning in with gleeful excitement. “Absolutely! He seemed totally into you, Maggie. I was practically invisible.”

A shy smile graced Maggie’s lips. “Really caught me off guard. Guys always hit on you first until they find out you have a boyfriend. Did you buy that story he told?”

Laura scoffed. “Totally bought it. What about you?”

Maggie’s smile faltered, her gaze shifting to the untouched napkin in her lap. “It sounded a bit far-fetched to me. He’s probably used it before.”

“Impossible!” Laura countered, her voice laced with conviction. “The timing was too perfect. That story couldn’t have been ready-made.”

A hint of doubt clouded Maggie’s eyes. “Or he’s just really quick on his feet.”

Laura leaned forward, her tone a mix of playful frustration and genuine encouragement. “Why are you fighting this? So what if he did make it up? You have to give the guy credit for creativity. When was the last time a guy put in that much effort to get you on a date? I’d actually be more impressed if he made the story up. But I think the story was legit. I watched him closely, and he doesn’t strike me as a guy with a lie.”

Maggie toyed with her napkin, a slight smile tugging at her lips. “I guess you’re right. That would be impressive either way. And he is pretty easy on the eyes.”

Laura grinned, unable to contain her excitement. “Understatement of the year. The man is a knockout! Have you seen those muscles? We need to check his website.”

They devoured the rest of their meal in a flurry of whispered plans and excited research. Soon, their heads were close together as they scrolled through Evan’s website and a few additional social media profiles. Maggie’s initial hesitation faded further with each page they discovered.

“Okay, he seems legit,” Maggie admitted, a hint of relief in her voice. “Now I’m starting to feel safe about going to this thing.”

Laura beamed. “See? Now stop over-thinking it! You and this handsome stranger are going to have a great time at that festival.”

Maggie’s smile faltered slightly, a last shred of doubt clinging to her. “But you and I were supposed to go to the festival.”

“You can’t be serious?” Laura said with a playful scoff. “You see me all the time! It would be much more exciting for me if you went out with this guy and told me all about it when you got home.”

Maggie bit her lip, a touch of uncertainty crossing her features. “You’re not going to come with and chaperone?”

Laura gave her a gentle nudge, her voice firm but encouraging. “Hell no! You haven’t been out on a date in months. Have a good time! Forget about where it might lead. Isn’t it time you enjoyed just being in the moment?”

Maggie sighed, her resolve crumbling. “I guess so. But I don’t see how it’s going to work. He lives in Highland Park. My car will never make it that far, and he’s not going to want to drive out here for the few hours a week I might be available.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Even if it worked out, how long before he gets upset that I never have any time for him?”

Laura’s hand landed on Maggie’s with a gentle squeeze. “Highland Park’s not that far. You’re giving me a headache,” she said, her tone teasing but laced with determination. “Just give the guy a chance. Go out with him tonight and see how it goes. Don’t worry so much about tomorrow.”

A touch of guilt shone in Maggie’s eyes. “You’re sure you won’t be upset? I feel bad you’ll be stuck at home.”

Laura’s smile widened, genuine excitement radiating from her. “I won’t be upset at all. In fact, I insist you go. I’ll pick you up when the date’s over. We’ll have all night to chat about it. I’m so excited for you!”

# Chapter 4: "Fun at the Fall Festival"

## Scene 18: "Maggie and Evan Break First Date Rules"

The hour away from Maggie and Laura dragged by for Evan. He meandered along the Naperville Riverwalk, berating himself for interrupting their dinner so brashly. His earlier boldness had evaporated. At least I took a chance, he tried to reassure himself. Better to be embarrassed than wonder what might have been. He’d spent some time exploring the fall festival, the twinkling lights and lively music promising a good time. Now, it was time to face his fate.

Evan’s spirits lifted as he rounded the corner. The two women waited, their smiles a warm invitation. A smile spread across his face in response.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he said, unable to hide his relief as he addressed both Maggie and Laura. “I was starting to get anxious. I checked out the festival; it looks amazing. Are you ladies ready?”

Laura, as always, was Maggie’s biggest supporter. “You two have a great time! Text me when you’re ready to be picked up.” She playfully nudged Maggie forward, then passed her off to Evan like a baton in a relay race.

“Take good care of my girl,” Laura called out as she retreated, leaving Evan and Maggie to embark on their date.

“Thank you for giving me a chance,” Evan said, his voice overflowing with sincerity and optimism. “I have a feeling Laura was cheerleading for me after I left.”

Maggie smiled, a trace of apprehension still lingering in her eyes. “She was definitely rooting for you. But before we head out, can we chat a bit?”

“Absolutely,” Evan agreed. “I know a spot that’s just perfect for us.”

With an air of familiarity born from his recent exploration, Evan led Maggie towards a secluded bench facing the river, away from the festival’s boisterous energy.

“Will this work?” he asked, gesturing towards the bench.

“This is perfect,” Maggie said, settling down with visible relief.

She met his gaze, a last trace of skepticism clouding her eyes. “I wanted to ask you something, Evan. I want you to be honest. I give you credit for being creative if you made up that story, but I would like to know if it’s true.”

A shadow crossed Evan’s face. In that brief pause, he recalled his promise to himself – not to lie but simply omit his intentions to end the relationship in a year. He reflected on his story, the way he’d felt a cosmic pull towards Maggie. In that moment, a flash of conviction reassured him that there was truth in every detail of his description of the day’s events.

“Honestly, I couldn’t make that up if I tried,” he said earnestly. “It’s all true.”

“It’s not important,” Maggie said, her curiosity evident. “But how old are you? I’m 26.”

“I’m 29.”

A genuine smile broke across Maggie’s face. “I checked out your company’s website. You’ve achieved a lot for your age.”

Evan’s smile was both grateful and a touch humble. “Thank you. I had a lot of help from a brilliant business partner, my sister, and a great team. I couldn’t have accomplished any of it without them.”

Maggie’s impressed smile deepened. “It is impressive. I think getting to know each other better is a good idea. But I have to ask, why is a guy like you single?”

Evan shrugged, a playful glint in his eyes. “I’m not a fan of playing the dating game, especially first dates. And I’m no good at it. It’s like there are all these unwritten rules I don’t understand. But I’m pretty sure I’m about to break one.”

A trace of curiosity crossed Maggie’s face. “Go for it!” she encouraged.

A shadow of something deeper, a fleeting vulnerability, crossed Evan’s features. Usually, he’d tuck away the painful echoes of his divorce, but with Maggie, some instinct told him there was space for honesty. It was time to put it out there, get it over with, and preserve the lighthearted tone he wanted for their date.

“I know people aren’t supposed to talk about exes on their first date,” he said, a hint of self-mockery in his tone. “But I want to be upfront with you from the start. I was married for several years and got divorced a little over a year ago. How bad of a first-date violation was that?”

Maggie met his gaze with a reassuring warmth. “You have nothing to worry about with me. I despise first-date etiquette. I don’t understand why people can’t be authentic from the start.”

Evan felt a surge of relief at her words, a sense of connection strengthening between them. “That’s good to hear. Ever since my divorce, I’ve been on a string of dates with no spark. It’s been rough. Even worse when friends set you up, and you feel obligated for a second date.”

Maggie nodded sympathetically. “Believe me, I understand. I’ve had my fair share of online dating nightmares too. But honestly, my main issue is time. Between culinary school and work, I’m swamped.”

She sighed, a mix of resignation and anticipation in her voice. Even though she liked Evan, she was sure her hectic schedule would be a deal-breaker. “I go to culinary school five days a week in the morning, and I work as a line cook six, sometimes seven nights a week. My only free time is a few hours in the afternoon and sometimes on Sundays.”

Evan’s smile conveyed genuine admiration. “I think that’s great! I admire people who work hard to better their lives.”

Maggie’s voice held a mix of resignation and vulnerability as she spoke. “That’s very kind of you to say. Evan, you’re incredibly charming, and I like you. But I think our time together is going to be limited to tonight. I’ll understand if you don’t want to go to the festival together.”

A hint of uncertainty crossed Evan’s face. Was she gently letting him down, or was there something more behind her words? “Please be candid – no need to spare my feelings. If you didn’t have such a busy schedule, would you be interested in exploring a relationship with me?”

Maggie met his gaze, her own eyes reflecting an internal struggle. “Don’t misunderstand me, Evan. I think you’re great, and I’d jump at the chance to see where this might go. But that’s exactly what frightens me. I’ve been dumped by a boyfriend who complained I didn’t see him enough. I don’t want to get too attached and then have that happen again.”

Evan felt a pang of understanding. Instead of dwelling on the past, a memory of his first date with Sarah sprang to mind, bringing a smile to his lips. He vividly recalled Sarah’s unconventional approach, her desire for transparency and practicality… traits he saw mirrored in Maggie.

“I remember this one date during my college years,” he began, a nostalgic gleam in his eyes. “It was pretty out of the ordinary. She was a busy business major, and we had a spark. Instead of the usual dating dance, she suggested we just start a relationship right there and then. It was like we were negotiating a business partnership.”

Maggie couldn’t stifle a giggle. “Talk about breaking first-date rules!”

“I know, right?” Evan grinned in response. “But it was great! She did a good job of laying out all the expectations upfront. She told me what she had to offer and what she expected from me and then opened it up for discussion. I know it sounds unromantic, but it felt the opposite. I was pleasantly surprised, to say the least.”

A thoughtful expression crossed Maggie’s face before, at first, she chuckled. Then, as if a light bulb switched on, she met his gaze with newfound understanding. “Seriously? That’s amusing yet fascinating. Are you suggesting we take a similar approach?”

Evan’s heart skipped a beat with excitement, relief washing over him as he saw her enthusiasm light up her face. “That’s precisely what I’m suggesting!”

Maggie’s optimism wavered, replaced by a hint of resignation. “I absolutely love the idea of leapfrogging the dating game. But how could we make it work with my schedule and you living an hour away?”

Evan, the strategist in him coming alive, saw Maggie’s concerns as cosmic validation. Everything she mentioned aligned perfectly with Liz’s relationship rules. He couldn’t help but view her hectic life and distance as convenient, not problematic.

“Your schedule may not be as big of an obstacle as you think,” he said with a reassuring smile. “I have a busy schedule too, and I often travel for my foundation. Since we’re both on the go, neither of us will have room to complain about limited time together. Plus,” he added with a wink, “there’s a silver lining to seeing each other less often.”

Intrigued, Maggie tilted her head. “A silver lining?”

“Absolutely! If we always leave each other wanting more, think how excited we’ll be every time we see each other. Isn’t that what matters most in a relationship, that feeling of anticipation?”

Maggie couldn’t help but smile at Evan’s infectious enthusiasm. “I’ve got to say, I never thought about it like that. I like the way you think. But even if we can get past that, I have another huge concern.”

Evan leaned forward, fully engaged in his problem-solving mission. “I’m sure we can find a solution. What’s the concern?”

A trace of vulnerability crossed Maggie’s face. Years of financial struggle had left their mark. “Based on what I saw online, I think it’s safe to assume you’re successful. Unfortunately, I have an issue with money.”

“What’s the issue?” Evan asked gently.

Maggie sighed, a mix of self-deprecation and weariness in her voice. “My issue is, I don’t have any. I barely get by working six days a week, and just thinking about money stresses me out. Last year, I dated a guy with money. It didn’t work out.”

“May I ask why?” Evan asked sincerely.

Maggie’s voice held a tinge of bitterness as she recounted her experience. “He loved taking me to fancy restaurants. The thought of how much he was spending made me cringe. I’d look the other way when the check came, but that annoyed him. One night, he made a point of showing me the bill. Evan, the overpriced wine and gourmet food cost more than my electric bill for several months. I couldn’t even enjoy the food every date after that.”

Evan rolled his eyes, an unspoken understanding passing between them. “Flaunting his wealth, I know the type.”

Maggie’s frustration continued to bubble beneath the surface. “It wasn’t even just the money. He didn’t like the way I dressed. He’d shower me with gifts – designer clothes, shoes, things I’d never wear. I asked him to stop, but he ignored me. So, I started returning what I could for cash to pay bills. Anything I couldn’t return, I gave to Laura. She was getting more out of that relationship than I was. When he found out what I was doing, he dumped me.”

“That guy was a jerk,” Evan said, his voice laced with sincerity. “A woman should wear what makes her feel comfortable, not what some man dictates. Giving a thoughtful gift is one thing, but repeatedly offering unwanted presents – that crosses a line.”

Maggie’s tense shoulders relaxed a fraction. She gave him a grateful smile, sensing a genuine kindness beneath his polished demeanor.

“But,” Evan continued thoughtfully, “being a culinary student, wouldn’t you enjoy exploring all types of restaurants – even expensive ones? I love a fine dining experience as much as a good, old-fashioned hotdog joint.”

Maggie tilted her head, considering. “Well...I suppose. But when you’re always broke, fine dining feels like a frivolous waste of money.”

“So, if money wasn’t an issue,” Evan probed, “would you enjoy occasionally going to nicer restaurants, or would you consider that, like your ex’s gifts, an unwelcome gesture?”

“If money were no object,” Maggie admitted, “I’d love to try everything. I plan to get a job at a high-end restaurant after graduation. They’ll pay me more, which means I can start saving to make my ultimate dream come true.”

“And that is?” Evan leaned in, his curiosity piqued.

A spark of excitement lit up Maggie’s eyes. “I want to own an Irish pub one day. A down-to-earth place where regular folks can get good food at an affordable price.”

“I love that idea!” Evan exclaimed. “Most pubs around town rely on deep-fried everything.”

Maggie beamed at his enthusiasm. “Exactly! I’d serve fresh comfort food, the kind that makes you feel at home.”

“I’d be a regular!” Evan said with a grin. “And I have a great idea that might resolve all your concerns.”

Maggie’s eyebrows shot up in intrigue. “I don’t see how, but lay it on me!”

Evan’s heart soared with a mix of genuine enthusiasm and a touch of self-satisfaction. This was working out even better than he’d anticipated. Maggie’s tight schedule, her geographical distance – these were not obstacles but perfect pieces falling into place for his new relationship strategy. He felt a pang of guilt, quickly pushed aside by a wave of optimism. He would make Maggie’s life better, at least for now. It was a win-win.

“Here’s what I propose.” His problem-solving mind kicked into gear. “My schedule’s flexible when I’m not traveling. Since you’re mostly free in the afternoons, that’s when we’ll hang out. I’ve always wanted to learn how to cook, so how about this? You teach me, and I’ll handle the groceries – the expensive stuff. You provide the kitchen and basics. We can spend time at your place, whip up something delicious, watch movies, whatever fun we can fit in between school and work. How does that sound?”

Maggie’s face held a mix of hope and skepticism. “It sounds too good to be true. You’d really drive all the way out here just to hang out for a few hours?”

“Absolutely!” Evan couldn’t contain his excitement. “Although I’m hoping to squeeze in a few Sundays here and there. I also have an idea about expanding your culinary horizons…”

Maggie leaned forward, intrigued. “Let’s hear it!”

Evan’s grin widened. “How about we make it a point to try out a new restaurant together? Once a week, or whenever we can manage. We take turns picking – sometimes I’ll go upscale, sometimes casual. As for your money concerns...” Evan paused, gauging her reaction, “...well, that’s where I’m the opposite of you. I don’t stress about money.”

Maggie's eyebrows arched, her tone teasing yet candid. “That’s because you have it.”

Evan’s smile turned thoughtful. “True, but it wasn’t always like that. I grew up with a single mom who worked two jobs to keep a roof over our heads. I learned pretty quickly that happiness wasn’t about a bank account.”

Maggie felt a surge of warmth. Hearing about Evan’s past struggles touched something deep within her, a shared echo of her own childhood. Her skepticism began to ebb.

“I understand that,” Maggie said softly, “But it’s different when you have bills piling up.”

Evan leaned forward, his eyes earnest. “Of course. But if you’re in a relationship where the other person gets your struggles, and is happy to help out, it seems like a wasted opportunity not to enjoy the experience, don’t you think?”

Maggie paused, wrestling with an unfamiliar feeling – hope. “I don’t know, Evan. You might not fully grasp just how deep my aversion to money runs.”

Evan couldn’t help a playful grin. “Well, since I’m already breaking first-date rules, I might as well channel my sister. She’d probably say, ‘Get over it!’”

Maggie laughed, surprised by the lightness in her chest. “You really do suck at first dates!”

“Told ya!” Evan laughed along, a sense of relief washing over him.

“Your sister sounds like Laura,” Maggie mused. “But you know, I see where you guys are coming from.”

Evan’s heart skipped a beat. Was she actually considering this? “Does that mean you’re willing to give it a shot?”

Maggie, with a hint of wonder in her own voice, surprised them both. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’d love to.”

“Yay!” Evan exclaimed, high-fiving an equally excited Maggie.

Maggie, sensing a newfound connection, smiled. “You know, Evan, I think this is going to be fun. I’m not quite sure who to thank – you, Laura, your sister, or even that college date of yours.”

A playful tone lingering in her voice, Maggie asked curiously, “Speaking of her, whatever happened to the college girl?”

The question hung in the air, and Evan’s vibrant energy deflated like a punctured balloon. After a weighty pause, a somber note crept into his voice. “I married her.” With those words, he rose from the bench, drawn to the river’s edge. He stood there, gazing at the water, lost in the painful echoes of his past.

Maggie’s heart ached. Regret washed over her for inadvertently stirring up painful memories. “I’m so sorry, Evan. That was insensitive of me.”

He turned, a forced smile masking his lingering pain. “It’s okay, Maggie. I’ll get past it. I always do.”

Maggie felt a surge of compassion. “You look like you could use a hug.”

She approached him and enveloped him in a warm, comforting embrace. His initial stiffness melted as he surrendered to the simple act of kindness.

Wordlessly acknowledging the unspoken hurt, Maggie murmured, “She broke your heart, didn’t she? That’s the real reason you’re single.”

Evan hesitated, the vulnerability of the moment at odds with his instinct to conceal his pain. “Maggie, I’m not good at talking about this...”

Maggie gently tilted his head to meet her gaze. “Maybe this is where it’s your turn to compromise. Keeping all that pain bottled up inside… that can be toxic for a new relationship.”

Evan recalled his sister’s similar plea. “Liz is always telling me it’s unhealthy to suppress my feelings about the divorce.”

“Maybe you should listen to her,” Maggie urged softly.

Something in Maggie’s unwavering kindness unlocked a tightly guarded part of Evan. He usually fought to keep these emotions at bay, but a torrent of words now seemed to push past his inner resistance.

“You know what I miss the most, Maggie? The intimacy. I don’t mean the physical stuff – that’s easy. I mean the everyday things… the touch, the closeness, the way a shared glance can make you feel understood. That kind of connection, it has to be genuine.”

Tears welled up in Maggie’s eyes as she felt the depth of his loneliness. A lump formed in her throat, mirroring his unspoken heartache.

His voice grew softer, laced with a deep ache for something that felt forever lost. “The hardest part of being alone isn’t the solitude. It’s knowing there’s no one there when all I need is a hand to hold, a kiss, someone whose thoughts echo my own. I haven’t felt that in so long… I feel so broken.”

The final word hung in the air, choked out as he valiantly fought back tears. Maggie couldn’t. Her tears spilled freely as she pulled him into another gentle, wordless embrace.

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## Scene 19: "Maggie and Evan’s First Kiss"

The lingering weight of the previous moment dissipated as Evan, with practiced ease, compartmentalized his pain. A playful grin spread across his face, chasing away the shadows. “Well, that got heavy fast,” he joked. “We should get honorary awards for spectacularly breaking all the first-date rules.”

A relieved smile spread across Maggie’s face, mirroring his shift toward lightness. “Absolutely,” she agreed. “Maybe they’ll even name a rule after us!”

“Perfect.” Evan’s smile grew wider. Something about her easy camaraderie sent a wave of warmth through him. “Now, it’s time for the real test - the compatibility challenge. Are you in?”

Intrigued, Maggie tilted her head. “Oh, this sounds interesting. Bring it on!”

“It’s not a make-or-break test,” Evan clarified, a hint of mock seriousness in his tone. “When I left you ladies earlier, I visited the festival’s ticket booth. They have these wristbands - the kind usually seen worn by the younger crowd. They let you go on all the rides as many times as you want.” Maggie’s laughter bubbled over, the sound light and cheerful. He paused, a playful glint in his eye. “I know, I know, not exactly a sophisticated date for grown-ups like us. But honestly, I really want to go on all the rides! I’ll completely understand if you’d rather do something a bit more...” he searched for the word, “age-appropriate.”

A spark of amusement lit up Maggie’s eyes. She loved how easily Evan could laugh at himself. It was a refreshing contrast to the men she usually dated. “Age-appropriate? Who wants to be a responsible adult?” she teased. “I’d love a ride-wristband date!”

Evan let out a relieved chuckle. “Excellent! That’s compatibility test number one passed with flying colors. Now, onto challenge number two...”

Maggie leaned in, her eyes twinkling. “Another challenge? I can’t wait.”

Evan’s playful smile widened. “Me neither! In a classic rom-com, right about now, the audience would get a musical montage of our best moments– us laughing on the rides, me winning you a stuffed animal, maybe even sharing some greasy, delicious food. All those smiles would make the audience melt.”

Maggie’s eyes sparkled. “Sounds amazing! What’s the challenge?”

Evan leaned on a nearby railing, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Well, in the movies, the audience would be on the edge of their seat in anticipation of a first kiss. The excitement will build through the montage of scenes. The audience will ask themselves, ‘Will they, or won’t they?’ Then, when the date ends, the audience is captivated as they watch the couple’s lips move closer to each other, certain they will kiss. Sometimes, they do kiss, but most of the time, some annoying event disrupts the kiss - leaving the audience in a state of intense anticipation, waiting, wondering when that first kiss will happen. That option is full of excitement and suspense. The other choice is to kiss now. And with the first kiss out of the way, we are free to kiss as much as we want the entire night. Which option would you prefer?”

Maggie considered her options, a playful smirk on her face. “Hmm, this is tricky!” Her left hand extended outward, as if presenting the first option. “The suspense, the uncertainty…that classic end-of-the-date kiss that might-or-might-not happen.” With a dramatic flourish, she switched to her right hand. “Or, we cut to the chase, kiss now, and spare our fans the agony of waiting. Then, unlimited kisses all night long!” She tilted her head, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “Did I get the options right?”

“Yep!” Evan confirmed, studying Maggie’s expression with playful anticipation. A mischievous smirk sparked in her eyes, mirroring his own. “What will it be?”

Maggie’s flirtatious smile grew wider. “Well, if I have to choose between a guaranteed kiss and a kiss that may or may not happen, I’ll take my kiss now!”

Maggie and Evan kissed. He hadn’t expected the overwhelming surge of emotion that washed over him. It wasn’t the heat of desire - this was different. A desperate craving for connection pulsed through him, his lips clinging to hers with surprising force. Relief mingled with a sharp tang of lingering sorrow, a potent mix he couldn’t fully unravel. Her lips were soft, yielding against his, a stark contrast to the tightness in his chest. As the kiss deepened, his ragged breaths slowed, his hold on her softening. The edges of his pain blurred, replaced by a healing warmth radiating from their connection, as though her touch, filled with understanding, began to mend his broken spirit.

Pulling back from the kiss, he searched Maggie’s eyes. Concern twisted in his stomach. Was that a trace of disappointment he saw, or simply surprise? The words tumbled out before he could stop them. “I’m so sorry. That was probably the worst first kiss ever.”

Maggie’s heart swelled with compassion. “Believe me, Evan, that was not the worst kiss ever. It was a little intense at first but ended quite nicely. I could feel both your pain and your relief in that kiss. Truthfully, I feel honored you would share that moment with me. I wouldn’t have wanted the kiss to go any other way.”

Evan smiled, his eyes filled with gratitude. “The good news is now we can kiss as much as we want! You ready for some rides?”

Maggie beamed, excitement bubbling up. “More than ready. Let’s Go!”

She turned towards Evan, a flash of hesitation crossing her face. Remembering Evan saying what he missed most were the little things – a gentle touch, the simple comfort of someone’s hand in his – she reached out and softly met his gaze. It wasn’t the tentative offer of a new acquaintance but a gesture born of understanding, a quiet promise of warmth and companionship.

Evan’s eyes widened with child-like surprise. The simple invitation held an unexpected weight. “Really?” His voice was soft, touched by her gesture and the understanding it conveyed.

She answered his surprised “Really?” with a gentle nod, her smile radiating a warmth that matched his own. His sincerity, that touch of child-like wonder over something so simple, was endearing. Refreshingly different, a sweetness amidst the jaded world of dates past. In that moment, she found him not just appealing but utterly adorable. When he reached for her hand, their fingers brushing, then gently intertwined, a warm jolt shot through them both, a surprising counterpoint to the evening chill. This was more than a casual date gesture; it was an unspoken understanding, a remedy to a loneliness he hadn’t even fully realized he carried.

A comfortable silence fell between them as they began their walk. Evan found his pace slowing, not from strategy or hesitation, but a simple desire to savor the unexpected comfort, the weight of Maggie’s hand in his.

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## Scene 20: "A “Great Night” Kiss"

The echoes of the fall festival had faded into a gentle hum, replaced by the quiet rustle of leaves on the sidewalk. Evan and Maggie stood alone on a side street in downtown Naperville, the warmth of the day still lingering in the cool night air. Laughter and music from the festival grounds had given way to the soft glow of streetlamps, casting long shadows across the brick sidewalks and shuttered storefronts.

Maggie leaned against Evan, a contented sigh escaping her lips. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages! Ferris wheels, great music, those impossible-to-win carnival games...and of course,” her eyes sparkled, “the kissing!” She smiled. “For the record, you’re an amazing kisser.”

A flush warmed Evan’s cheeks. He wanted to echo her enthusiasm, shower her with compliments, but an unexpected hesitation held him back. Uncertain of the source of his reluctance, he decided to keep it simple but sincere. “I had a great time too.”

Their eyes met, and a charged silence fell between them. Maggie seemed oblivious to his inner unrest, leaning in for another kiss. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and for a blissful few moments, Evan simply surrendered. Her lips were soft against his, the warmth of her body chasing away the lingering chill. Comfort flooded through him, a welcome respite from the ache of loneliness. This feels right, a voice whispered. This is how it’s supposed to be.

Yet, as the kiss deepened, a shadow of doubt crept into his mind. It wasn’t the fiery passion he’d felt with Sarah, sparking visions of an ever-after. But there was kindness here, a sweetness unlike any he’d known recently. Could this be enough? Could he build a good life with Maggie beyond a year, even if that head-over-heels feeling remained elusive?

He pulled back slowly, his gaze searching hers. The scent of her perfume, a delicate floral mix, hung in the air. “That was nice,” he murmured. His words were gentle, affectionate, and completely sincere. Yet, a trace of uncertainty persisted in his tone, a silent question neither dared to express.

“That was wonderful. I wanted to squeeze one last kiss in before Laura arrives.” Maggie glanced towards the street. “She should be here soon,” she murmured, a hint of reluctance in her voice. “If she sees us kiss good night, she’ll hound me all night, demanding details. Tonight has been so incredible. I want to embrace this feeling for a while before telling her how awesome tonight was. It’s probably a good idea if we don’t hold hands either.”

“Gotcha. I’ll keep a straight face so she won’t know how happy I am,“ Evan teased. “Are we still on for Tuesday through Thursday afternoon dates and cooking lessons?”

“Definitely!” Maggie’s eyes shone. “Teaching you to cook is going to be a blast!”

A familiar car turned the corner, its headlights cutting through the dusk. Laura smiled as she waved from the driver’s seat. Maggie opened the passenger door. She was halfway into her seat, then paused, a wave of defiance washing over her, “Screw it!” She ran back to Evan and planted a long, slow kiss on his lips,” before returning to Laura’s car.

Laura gaped at the scene, her jaw practically hitting the steering wheel. “Oh. My. God!” As Laura drove away, she glanced at Maggie, her eyes wide with astonishment. “Did my eyes really see what I think they just saw? I want to hear every detail!”

Maggie settled into her seat, a dreamy smile on her face. She leaned back, eyes closed, basking in a contentment she hadn’t felt in years. Laura’s persistent demands for details faded into a distant hum. All that mattered was this: tonight, something wonderful had begun.

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## Scene 21: "Evan has Mixed Feelings"

Basking in the afterglow of Maggie’s final kiss, Evan waved goodbye as he watched Laura’s taillights disappear into the night. An affectionate smile curved his lips. A wave of warmth washed over him, a lingering glow from his time with Maggie. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so… carefree. Her smile, the infectious energy that sparked between them, the way her soft hand fit neatly into his for a brief, stolen moment – it all conjured a sense of lightness, a comfort he hadn’t expected.

He found a nearby bench and slumped down, his elbows resting on his knees, head buried in his hands. The cool night air barely registered against the heat of his conflicting thoughts. He’d made a plan, resolved to chart a different course after his heart had been shattered, but now… now it all felt tangled and uncertain.

Maybe we don’t have to be head over heels to build something good. The thought emerged, a whisper of logic seeking to calm the storm in his mind. Can’t two people simply enjoy each other’s company? Be happy? Treat each other with kindness? Maybe that’s enough.

Yet even as he formed the words, doubt clawed at their edges. Enough for me? Yes. But is it enough for her? She deserves better than a relationship with an expiration date. The thought stung.

But...would ending this now really be better? His analytical side chimed in. She won’t be alone; she’ll have me to spend time with. We’ll have fun. I’ll be good to her. Isn’t that better than going back to square one? Back into that endless dating cycle?

He closed his eyes, the memory of Maggie’s joyous smile, her enthusiasm for their upcoming dates, flashing before him. Her vulnerability, the way she shared her fears and hopes about the future...It’s not just a casual fling, a voice inside him warned. She’s not “just another girl.”

But then, there was Sarah. His Sarah – love at first sight. How could I ever feel that way about anyone else? His heart ached with the familiar pang of loss.

Maybe love takes time, he countered. Not every story is a whirlwind romance. Maybe it grows, slowly and steadily, from friendship and respect… But could he risk leading Maggie down that path, knowing it might lead nowhere?

I could tell her. The idea surfaced, unwelcome. Tell her about the plan, the end date, let her choose...A bitter laugh escaped him. Yeah, sure, that would be a great start to a relationship. Who would want a boyfriend on a timer?

As the night deepened, Evan’s thoughts circled back on themselves. He couldn’t untangle the knot. Logic and emotion offered contradictory solutions. Guilt gnawed at him, but even so, the warmth of Maggie’s affection lingered. I can give her a good relationship, he told himself, but the question hung in the air, unanswered: Is a year of happiness worth the risk of a broken heart?

The chaos in his mind swirled, relentless. It seemed nothing would bring resolution tonight. Then came the lightning flash, a searing crack across the sky that sliced through his contemplations. The ensuing thunder rattled him to his core, the first heavy raindrops chilling his skin. The sudden shift in the weather broke his trance, the storm a turbulent echo of his own internal conflict. Time for decisions could wait. For tonight, it was simply time to go.

Shoulders hunched against the onslaught, he hurried to his car. Questions buzzed in his head alongside the insistent hum of the downpour. Was this sudden storm a warning from some unseen force? An omen pushing him away from a path destined for heartbreak? Or was it a cosmic nudge towards acceptance – a sign to stop overthinking, to embrace a chance for happiness, imperfect as it might be?

As he began his long drive home, Evan stared out at the downpour, a sense of grim irony washing over him. As is often said, the Universe works in mysterious ways – first delivering a gift in the form of Maggie, then sending mixed signals with this sudden storm. Cosmic guidance, it seemed, came without clear instructions.

# Chapter 5: "Maggie’s Indoor Picnic"

## Scene 22: "Thresholds of Hope and Plans"

***Six days after Evan and Maggie’s first met…***

The Vaughn Group’s fourth-floor office buzzed with quiet efficiency. Its sleek design seamlessly blended minimalist decor with a touch of artistic whimsy. Monochromatic photographs of Chicago’s architectural landmarks hung beside motivational posters, while a vibrant abstract triptych dominated the “Inspiration” conference room. Its presence was a testament to its namesake.

This three-canvas painting held the focus of the space, a testament to abstract art’s power to evoke emotion and thought. Each panel was a whirlpool of vivid colors, swirling with such intensity that it seemed alive. The left piece burst with shades of cerulean and sapphire, mimicking the depth and mystery of the ocean. The central canvas bridged the transition with a cascade of emerald and lime, evoking the lushness of a ancient forest. The right panel completed the journey with a blaze of scarlet and amber, a fiery sunset captured in perpetuity. Separately, each painting was a stunning piece of art, but together, they created a coherent narrative of color and motion. The triptych was more than decor; it was a visual symphony, each brushstroke contributing to a larger story of beauty and inspiration, perfectly embodying the room’s nickname.

Liz sat hunched over her expansive desk, a stack of documents claiming her focus. Evan’s knock disrupted her focus.

“Hey Liz, you got a minute?” he asked, leaning in the doorway with an unmistakable energy about him.

“Sure, come on in,” Liz replied, the hint of a smile softening her features. She swiveled in her chair, setting the paperwork aside. “What’s up?” She could practically feel the excitement radiating off him.

Evan settled into the chair across from Liz’s desk, a grateful smile playing on his lips. “I appreciate your willingness to meet Maggie. I know it’s not ideal for her to get too close to my inner circle, but I couldn’t free up my schedule in time to pick her up before the play tonight...“ His voice trailed off, a slight sheepishness creeping into his expression. “And to be honest, I really wanted you to meet her.”

Liz’s curiosity shone in her eyes. “It’s okay, Evan. I’m actually quite intrigued. I know you still have a few weeks to officially start the year with Maggie, but have you made a decision yet?”

“Not officially,” Evan admitted. A hint of hesitation crossed his face. “I want to be sure she’s interested in a relationship, and I wanted her to meet you first.”

“You don’t need my approval,” Liz replied, a touch of warmth in her voice.

“I know, but...” A touch of vulnerability crept into his voice. “Honestly, I trust your judgment. It would be hard to move forward without your blessing. I’m pretty sure you two will hit it off. She’s down-to-earth and hardworking – just the kind of person you admire.”

Liz couldn’t help but smile. Evan’s enthusiasm was infectious. “You’ve certainly been in a good mood this week. How many dates have you had?”

Evan beamed. “Four in total. We kicked things off at the fall festival, and she’s been teaching me to cook all week!”

“So I’ve heard,” Liz chuckled. “Trish spilled the beans about your surprise. Can I help with the setup?”

“It’s all under control,” Evan assured her. His eyes sparkled. “But hey, thanks for the offer!”

Liz leaned forward, her concern evident in her voice. “So, are you still determined to go through with your one-year relationship plan?”

Evan nodded slowly. “Yes. I admit I had my doubts after our first date. She is such a great girl, and I don’t want to hurt her. But after spending so much time with her this week, I feel this could be something good. But I was still on the fence until earlier today.”

“What happened earlier today?” Liz asked, her brow furrowed.

Evan sighed. “I spoke to Guido. He thinks I should drop this plan and be his wingman, which is never gonna happen. He said I can’t do this plan half-ass - either I’m all in or all out. “Guido’s right. Obsessing over my doubts doesn’t benefit me or Maggie.”

Liz’s voice softened. “Although I’d rather you not pursue this plan of yours, I’m glad you decided not to be Guido’s ‘wingman.’”

“It wasn’t just Guido’s advice that convinced me,” Evan countered, his tone thoughtful. “After thinking about it, I realized I would never have met Maggie without this plan. She lives far away and isn’t on any dating sites. I figure maybe it was meant to be, no matter how it turns out. She may not be my true love, but I’m going to push aside my doubts and give her the best that I have to offer. After all, she deserves it.”

Liz studied her brother, a mix of worry and hope reflected in her eyes. “Well, Evan, I promised to support you, and I will. I only ask one favor. Be open to letting love in. I’m not suggesting you force it; you can’t fake love. But I think a year will be enough time to know your true feelings for Maggie. And I’m convinced if your feelings for her grow into love, you’ll abandon your plan to break up. But, if you don’t fall in love with her, as much as I hate to admit it, letting go will be the right thing to do.

Evan leaned back in his chair, a trace of concern crossing his face. “Enough about me. How are you feeling about your procedure tomorrow?”

Liz took a quiet breath. At 31, time felt heavy on her heart She’d always envisioned motherhood unfolding naturally, with two children before her 30th birthday. The image of two laughing children, a picture she’d once held so clearly in her mind, now felt faded and distant. After a string of miscarriages – her last, a year ago – and no success conceiving since, the dream had begun to slip away. The IVF procedure represented a reluctant compromise, a desperate hope when time seemed to be running out.

“Nervous and excited,” Liz finally admitted, the simple words barely containing the complex emotions swirling within her.

Evan’s sincerity shone in his eyes. “I wish there was something I could do to help. It all feels so unfair. I want you to know I’m here for you. If you need anything, anything at all, please let me know.”

“I appreciate that.” Touched by his genuine concern, Liz’s voice softened. “But there’s no need to worry. It’s outpatient, and Alicia is a pro.” A fleeting sigh escaped her lips before she forced a smile. “I just wish I didn’t need her expertise in the first place.”

Evan’s phone buzzed, distracting them both. He glanced at the screen, a wide grin spreading across his face. “That’s Maggie! She’ll be here soon. I’ve got to go finish setting up her surprise.”

He bolted from Liz’s office, his excitement a stark contrast to the quiet anxieties that lingered in the room.

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## Scene 23: "Maggie Walks to Evan’s Office"

Maggie exited Union Station into the early evening bustle. The Willis Tower gleamed overhead, marking the direction of Evan’s office. Should she splurge on a cab? I’ve got time, she reasoned, glancing at her watch. Tapping the address into her GPS, she scoffed at the estimated walking time. Ten blocks was nothing. The never-worn designer heels she borrowed from Laura, however...She grimaced, then squared her shoulders. Who needs a taxi?

The initial steps were manageable, but with each block, the shoes’ sleek beauty transformed into exquisite torture. Chicago’s sidewalks, cracked and uneven, became an obstacle course. She ducked into a doorway, a brief respite to massage throbbing arches. Another glance at her phone. She should text Evan… “On my way! Just a few more blocks.”

Halfway there, an “L” train thundered overhead drowning out the traffic. The city felt overwhelming, its towering facades closing in. With each step, a dull ache pulsed in her feet, a premonition of the soreness that would surely follow.

She could see Evan’s office building in the distance, a welcome sight promising an end to her ordeal. With every strained step, it loomed closer, a finish line after an unexpected marathon. A gust of wind lifted a strand of hair from her carefully styled updo, and she shivered slightly.

As she entered the building’s sleek lobby, Maggie silently regretted not taking a taxi. If she had a chance to do it again, she’d would’ve hopped in a cab, no matter the cost.

Before heading toward the elevators, Maggie slipped into the lobby restroom. The cool marble and muted lighting offered a stark contrast to the bustle outside. Automatically, she began her routine: a touch of lipstick, a smoothing of her dress, a final adjustment of her wind-blown hair. As she spritzed a touch of perfume, a touch of nervousness danced in her stomach. Meeting Evan’s sister, especially this early, was unexpected.

This play has been sold out for months, she thought, glancing at her reflection. I bet the tickets cost a fortune. A self-reprimanding voice echoed in her mind, Remember, you promised Evan you wouldn’t worry about how much things cost.

Taking a deep breath, she tucked the familiar worry away. One last glance in the mirror, another fortifying breath, and Laura’s words echoed in her mind, Relax, just enjoy yourself tonight.

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## Scene 24: "Maggie Meets Trish and Liz"

Trish Barnes was The Vaughn Group’s first hire. She was a whirlwind of efficiency wrapped in a dark-haired, 34-year-old package and the vital cog that kept the company running efficiently. She held the unique distinction of being both receptionist and office manager, a testament to both her love for greeting people and her uncanny organizational skills. Despite repeated attempts by Liz and Evan to relieve her of her receptionist duties as part of her promotion, Trish stubbornly clung to her receptionist duties, earning the self-proclaimed “highest-paid receptionist in Chicago” title with a knowing smile.

It was past five on a Friday, past her usual time to dash home to her family, but tonight was different. Evan’s mystery date, Maggie, was arriving any minute, and Trish had to get a glimpse. She’d never liked Sarah, and her protective instincts were on high alert when it came to Evan.

As Maggie stepped into the Vaughn Group’s office suite, she found herself genuinely impressed. “I’m here to see Evan Vaughn,” she told Trish, a hint of breathlessness in her voice, though Maggie couldn’t tell if it was nerves or exertion.

“Just a moment, please. Evan’s finishing something up, but he wanted you to meet his sister first,” Trish replied, a note of warmth entering her tone. She caught Maggie’s slight wince. “Oof, those look fierce. Are you alright?”

“Fantastic,” Maggie replied with an ironic twist of her lips. “If by ‘fantastic’ you mean my feet are ready to revolt.”

Trish laughed, and something inside Maggie unclenched just a bit. “Honey, if you want to lose those, no one here is judging. It’s Friday, and things are pretty casual around here.” Trish reached out with a reassuring smile and gave Maggie’s arm a gentle squeeze

A wave of blissful relief washed over Maggie as she kicked off the offending heels. Maggie said, “Thank you!” A sigh, involuntary and laced with pure pleasure, escaped her lips as the relentless ache in her feet began to melt away. She scooped up the shoes. They were much more comfortable in her hands than on her feet. With grateful steps, she followed Trish to Liz’s office. The carpet’s plush fibers felt like soft pillows beneath her weary soles. These women seemed…kind, somehow. Trish made the introductions, and another wave of relief washed over Maggie at the genuine welcome in Liz’s eyes.

“Sorry about the shoes,” she blurted, shaking Liz’s hand. “Brand new, and not such a good idea to hoof it from the train station, apparently.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “You poor thing! We would have picked you up!”

“No worries!” Maggie replied, forcing a cheerful note into her voice. “I’m so glad to finally meet you, Liz. Evan’s told me wonderful things.”

“I have heard great things about you, too,” Liz returned, a warmth in her smile that Maggie found contagious. Liz winked at Trish. “Trish, I believe Evan has a surprise waiting for Maggie. Would you be so kind as to escort Maggie to the conference room.”

Maggie’s eyes widened with a spark of excitement and intrigue. “Surprise!?”

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## Scene 25: "Maggie’s Indoor Picnic"

A thrill of anticipation ran through Maggie. What was this surprise Liz mentioned? Trish, walking her to the conference room, wore a knowing smile that hinted at something delightful. As they reached the closed door, Trish paused, a glint of amusement in her eyes. “Are you ready for your surprise?”

Maggie nodded eagerly, her stomach fluttering with a mix of excitement and nerves. With a flourish, Trish swung the door open, revealing Evan and… A picnic? In the office? A touch of surprise ran through her. Candles, a blanket...is that wine?

Evan, your date is here.” Trish gave him a playful wink. “Have a great weekend. I’ll see you on Monday.

A surge of ease swept through Maggie at the genuine smile Trish gave her. As the door closed behind them, both Evan and Maggie bid Trish farewell. With a touch of nerves but mostly excitement, Maggie leaned in, kissing Evan softly.

When she pulled back, Evan grinned. “You look great! What’s with the shoes?” His brow furrowed, a hint of concern replacing the teasing in his eyes.

Maggie self-consciously held up the offending heels. “Don’t ask,” she muttered, a mix of embarrassment and amusement in her voice.

Eyes widening, Maggie took in the transformed conference room. A checkered blanket spread over the table, candles casting a soft glow, the enticing aroma of warm bread filling the air...and was that a picnic basket in the corner? A wave of wonder and appreciation washed over Maggie. She could tell this wasn’t a haphazard setup but rather one carefully planned with her comfort in mind.

“Did you do all this for me?” Her voice held a mix of awe and disbelief.

Evan beamed, a touch of pride evident. “I sure did!” He pulled out a chair for her, an old-fashioned gesture that brought a smile to Maggie’s lips

Evan poured them each a glass of wine, the crimson liquid swirling against the candlelight. Before sitting down across from her, he offered a playful grin. “I’ve been experimenting with those food lessons, as you can see.” He gestured toward the spread. “Tonight, I prepared your very own gourmet chicken salad sandwich, with a side of fruit cocktail and a bag of potato chips...for authenticity.”

A hint of surprise mixed with amusement danced in Maggie’s eyes. Evan took his seat and raised his glass. “To exciting times ahead.”

Their glasses clinked, followed by a kiss that held a subtle shift, a deepening of their connection.

“Thank you so much!” Maggie’s warmth was genuine. “Everything looks amazing. Did you make it yourself?”

A teasing glint entered Evan’s eyes. “Yep! Even sealed the potato chips in a bag for that professional touch.”

Maggie laughed, catching the playful jab. “You know what I mean. The chicken salad?”

“That, I take full credit for.” Evan beamed.

“I can’t wait to try it!”

They both took a simultaneous bite, and Maggie’s expression shifted to one of genuine surprise. “Wow, Evan, this is seriously good. It’s unique, not a typical chicken salad.”

Evan grinned, delighted by her reaction. “It’s my elevated take, thanks to my brilliant teacher. Instead of the usual mix, I went with thick slivers of chicken and spread the dressing on top.” He tilted his head, a playful challenge in his eyes. “Can you guess the ingredients?”

Maggie, ever the food enthusiast, took the bait. “Chicken, obviously. Fresh dill, I like that! Onions, salt, pepper, a hint of lemon… but the dressing has me stumped. It’s sweet, not your typical mayo.”

Evan hesitated, a flash of sheepishness crossing his face. “Okay, here’s where I confess, I may not be using the highest quality ingredients.” He took a deep breath. “Liz used to make my sandwiches with it when we were kids, and I never quite shook the taste… Miracle Whip.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe I’ve never had it! It’s delicious, adds a whole new dimension.” She met his gaze, sincerity in her voice. “As your teacher, A+ for creativity! This is miles above boring chicken salad.”

“You really like it?” Evan asked, a touch of vulnerability in his tone.

Maggie’s smile was warm and reassuring. “I love it! Honestly, if I open my own place, this could be a lunch special.”

Evan, a glint of triumph in his eyes, leaned in with a mischievous smirk. “You’ll be pleased to know this entire date, from the food to those fancy theater tickets a vendor gifted me – total cost under thirty bucks!”

Maggie’s laughter rang out, a mix of delight and a sense of ease that washed over Evan. “You have no idea how happy that makes me,” she said, her voice tinged with genuine relief and a hint of playful affection. A wave of serenity spread through her, a mix of gratitude and growing fondness. He actually listened to me, a small voice whispered in her head, cared enough to cater to my silly money issues. That simple act felt more precious than any grand gesture.

Internally, A sense of satisfaction flooded through Evan. That sparkle in Maggie’s eyes was the best reward. Honestly, he would have done this for her even without Liz’s relationship rules in his ear. The fact that this perfect surprise happened to align with Rule #1 – well, that was just a bonus. A small smile played on his lips. Liz would be proud.

Between bites of chicken salad and sips of wine, a playful banter filled the room. Maggie regaled Evan with the tale of her disastrous shoe choice, her laughter as infectious as the joy bubbling up within him. Their conversation flitted from shared anecdotes to Evan’s arduous endeavors for scoring free theater tickets to a sold-out play, each revelation drawing them closer. The energy between them crackled, flirtatious glances sparking like fireworks on a summer night.

Maggie, gaze drawn to the vibrant paintings, broke the comfortable rhythm. “I love those paintings,” she remarked, gesturing towards the wall behind Evan. “They’re so different than the rest of your office décor. They really stand out.”

Evan swiveled slightly in his chair. “They’re Liz’s pride and joy!”

“Liz is an artist?” Maggie asked, her curiosity piqued.

Evan chuckled. “Hardly. The Vaughn siblings have zero artistic talent. We’re lucky if we can manage a stick figure. Those were painted by Liz’s young friend, Chloe.”

“Liz’s young friend is quite talented,” Maggie said, genuine admiration in her voice. “Those paintings are gorgeous!”

“I agree, along with everyone else in the office,” Evan said. “It’s a fascinating triptych.”

“Huh?” Maggie’s brow furrowed in confusion.

Evan laughed. “That was my reaction, too, the first time I heard it. So, a triptych, right? I only know this because Liz told me. It’s basically one of those art things where you have three pieces that sort of go together. Like, they’re separate but make more sense when you look at them side by side. Each panel can stand on its own, but together, they tell a bigger story or show a bigger picture. Kinda like a three-part series in a book or something.”

Maggie’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Fascinating! I guess it’s true. You learn something new every day.”

A melodic chime broke through the conversation, drawing Evan’s attention to his phone. He raised an apologetic eyebrow at Maggie. “It seems time has gotten away from us,” he said with a playful sigh. “We’ve got to get a move on if we want to get to the play on time.”

As Evan dismissed his alarm, a smile flitted across his face. He caught a glimpse of a group text from Trish and Liz – a flurry of thumbs-up emojis and a quick “She’s great!” A quiet satisfaction coursed through him. Liz’s apparent approval was another checkmark on his internal list, confirming that Maggie was the right woman to start his relationship plan with.

Maggie glanced down at Laura’s designer heels, a spark of dread crossing her face. The thought of cramming her feet back into those torture devices was almost unbearable.

Eyes pleading, she looked at Evan. “I really hope there’s not much walking involved.”

Evan’s smile was reassuring. “Don’t worry, it’s mostly driving, very little walking.” Evan’s eyes held a playful glint. “Worst case, I’ll carry you everywhere.”

“I love that idea! Though I might just cling to your arm all night instead.” A flirtatious smile played on her lips as she slipped the heels back on with a grimace. Evan’s arm swept around her waist, offering support and a touch of old-fashioned gallantry.

Outside the office building, a warm breeze ruffled Maggie’s hair. The promise of the evening ahead, a mix of laughter, art, and the deepening connection with Evan, chased away the memory of her aching feet. “Ready to take on the theater world?” he asked, a grin playing on his lips.

“Absolutely,” Maggie replied, her smile matching his. Her heart fluttered with an anticipation even sweeter than the prospect of the play.

Evan’s eyes held hers for a fleeting moment, and the air crackled with unspoken possibilities. An idea ignited in his mind, prompting him to reach for his phone and tap out a text message.

A hint of curiosity flashed across Maggie’s features. “Who ya texting?” she asked, unable to resist.

A playful expression crossed Evan’s eyes. “Oh, just texting Liz...nothing important.” Whatever it was, it brought a secretive smile to his lips.

# Chapter 6: "Maggie and Evan’s Year Begins"

## Scene 26: "Evan Invites Maggie to His Place"

The roar of applause faded into the echoing silence of the parking garage. A line of cars inched towards the exit as Maggie turned to Evan, her cheeks still flushed with the afterglow of the performance.

“I really, really enjoyed that, Evan. Thank you so much. I’ve never seen a live play before.” The sincerity in her voice was unmistakable.

A warmth spread through Evan. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. I love live theater.” His smile held a hint of satisfaction.

Maggie nodded, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “I can see why. It’s so much better than a night at the movies.”

The hum of the engine filled the brief silence between them as their car crept closer to the exit. A touch of anticipation mingled with uncertainty in Evan’s gaze. “When it’s our turn to exit, I could turn left to get to the highway and drop you off at home.” He kept his voice casual, but his pulse quickened. “Or I can turn right, and we could go back to my place.”

Maggie’s breath caught in her throat. “You mean to stay the night?” There was a slight tremor in her voice.

Evan nodded, a shadow of vulnerability flashing across his face. “Yes.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet, and I didn’t bring a change of clothes or anything,” Maggie said, her tone tinged with hesitation. Inside, desire and fear clashed.

Evan caught a hint of hesitation in Maggie’s eyes. Keen to put her at ease, he quickly adopted a playful grin. “Did you think I meant for us to sleep together?” he asked, his tone light. “No, I certainly did not mean that.”

Maggie tilted her head, her expression softening. “You didn’t?”

Evan gave her a mock-wounded look. “No, of course not. We barely know each other.” He held her gaze for a moment, a twinkle in his eye. “I wouldn’t sleep with you even if you begged me to.”

A giggle escaped Maggie's lips. The realization hit her – Evan was teasing! “Oh, Evan, will you please sleep with me? Oh, please sleep with me! I’m begging you!” Her voice took on a playfully exaggerated, pleading tone.

Evan feigned deep contemplation, his hand stroking his chin. “Geez, Maggie. I guess I will. If you insist.” A wide grin spread across his face.

Maggie burst into laughter, the tension of the past few moments dissolving. “You caved fast!”

“I felt sorry for you, with you begging and all.” He leaned back in his seat, a playful glint still dancing in his eyes.

Evan’s playful grin softened as he looked at Maggie, his gaze turning serious and sincere. “I like spending time with you,” he said, his voice low and earnest. “I have a guest bedroom with a private bathroom. We can find you something to wear to bed. We can have a drink, talk a bit, or watch TV. I’m not expecting anything more. I just don’t want our night to end.”

A blush crept up Maggie’s cheeks. “I don’t want our night to end, either,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “But I’ve known you less than a week. It’s all moving so fast.”

I get it, Evan thought, a pang of disappointment mingling with understanding. He couldn’t push her; he genuinely wanted her to feel comfortable. “One more car until the exit,” he said, keeping his tone light. “If you don’t tell me differently, I’ll turn left and head toward Naperville.”

Maggie’s heart raced. She battled an internal storm of desire and hesitation. The prospect of spending the night with Evan held both thrill and fear. It was like standing at the edge of a precipice... a leap of faith with unknown consequences.

It was Evan’s turn to exit the garage. He had his left turn signal on, ready to head towards Maggie’s familiar territory.

Maggie's breath hitched in her throat, her heart pounding against her ribs. "Go right!" she blurted out, reckless abandon pushing her beyond her fearful reservations. "Go right!"

Evan’s heart skipped a beat. Suppressing a triumphant smile, he flicked off his left turn signal and swung the car to the right. An invigorating sense of anticipation filled him – the night was just beginning.

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## Scene 27: "Maggie’s Foot Massage"

Evan pulled into his driveway and cut the engine. Upon entering Evan’s home, Maggie slipped off her heels, a frustrated sigh escaped her lips. “I am never wearing those damn shoes again!”

Evan’s concerned gaze swept over her. “I have something for your feet. Come on in – have a seat in the recliner while I get you something to drink.”

Maggie followed him into the house, her eyes widening slightly as she glanced around. “You have a nice place. Do you live alone?”

He nodded as he rummaged through his cabinets and fridge. “Yep, just me. Now, what’ll it be? Beer, wine, whiskey, rum?”

Maggie smiled, a mischievous glint in her eye. “I’ll answer like my father does when asked that question.” She lowered her voice, imitating her father’s thick Irish accent, “‘Some may choose wine, but it’s not a favorite of mine. I prefer life a bit more risky. Grab a glass and pour me some whiskey.’”

A pleasant surprise rippled through Evan as she mimicked her father’s accent. It was unexpected and disarming in a way that completely charmed him. Evan chuckled. “I love it! I’m normally a Jack and Coke man, but for you, let’s break out the good stuff. How do you take yours?”

“Neat, please.” Maggie watched him, a mixture of amusement and gratitude softening her features.

Evan returned from the kitchen, carrying Maggie’s drink and a footstool. “Here you go,” he said, handing her her drink. He positioned the footstool in front of Maggie’s chair before heading toward his bedroom. “I’ll be right back,” he called over his shoulder.

Maggie watched him disappear down a hallway, a flutter of curiosity in her chest. What’s he up to?

A few minutes later, he returned. His suit jacket was gone, his tie loosened, and his sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, revealing strong forearms. Evan carried a large plastic footbath, and Maggie’s curiosity deepened. He placed the footbath in front of her and sat on the footstool, a touch of formality replaced by relaxed comfort.

“Let’s have a look at those feet. I see a few hot spots, but thankfully no blisters yet. Now, put them in the water. Might sting a bit at first – I added a special powder that will cool and soothe them.”

“I was a personal trainer in college,” Evan explained, “and between running and hiking, I know a thing or two about sore feet. That powder has saved me and my clients a lot of pain.”

They chatted as Maggie’s feet soaked, the soothing warmth easing the tension from her body. After a while, Evan retrieved a soft towel, carefully patting her feet dry. He squeezed a dollop of lotion into his hands, the scent of lavender filling the air.

“You don’t have to do this,” Maggie murmured, a touch of unease crossing her face. “You’ve done so much for me already.”

“I don’t mind,” Evan replied, his voice soft. “Besides, what kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t take care of my girlfriend’s sore feet?” Evan winced internally. He wasn’t sure if he’d overstepped, but it felt good to say it out loud.

Maggie’s eyes flew open. A playful smile touched her lips, masking an underlying seriousness. “So, is that what I am then? Your girlfriend?”

A hopeful gleam shimmered across Evan’s face. “I don’t know. I guess I was testing the waters, hoping it sounded right.” His voice softened. “I’d like it to be that way, though.”

“I just don’t think I’m ready,” Maggie said, her voice barely a whisper. “This is all so new...unexpected. I don’t want to see anyone else. I’m just...nervous about labels.”

A tad of disappointment flared, but Evan was determined not to pressure her. He’d already had a better night than he could have hoped for. Evan’s hands stilled, his expression shifting to one of sincere understanding. “I get it.”

Not wanting to dwell on Maggie's reluctance, Evan quickly transitioned to lighthearted small talk. He continued the gentle massage, his fingers expertly working the tension from her feet. The chatter faded into a blissful silence. Maggie's toes curled, a shiver of unexpected pleasure running up her legs. She hadn't been touched like this in...well...never. Closing her eyes, she focused on the sensation, not wanting to break the spell. The minutes floated by, carrying away the ache in her feet and some of the deeper weariness in her soul.

When the massage was finished, Maggie opened her eyes and looked at Evan. "Thank you," she said, her voice soft. "That was amazing." A sense of ease filled her – not just from the footbath, but from his unexpected kindness. Evan smiled in response, a touch of warmth in his eyes. Although a lingering hesitation about labels remained, her heart felt surprisingly light. "I should probably get changed. You said you can find something for me to wear?"

Evan gestured toward the dining room table, where a carefully arranged stack of clothes awaited. Women’s pajamas, cozy sweats, a warm sweatshirt, and comfortable tennis shoes were laid out. A slip of paper simply bearing the name ‘Maggie’, written in graceful handwriting, rested on top. A twinge of disappointment washed over Maggie – this was far more than a hastily assembled outfit.

A prickle of irritation crossed her features. “Well, you certainly had this whole night planned out, didn’t you? Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” A tinge of accusation edged her voice

Evan chuckled at Maggie’s misinterpretation. “No, not at all. I honestly planned on taking you home after the play.” His voice softened. “But after our picnic date, I realized I wanted to spend as much time with you as possible. Remember the text I sent outside my office?”

Maggie nodded, not quite ready to speak. She was still processing, trying to decide if she’d misread the situation.

“I noticed you and Liz are about the same size,” Evan continued, “so I took a chance and texted her. I asked if she could bring some comfortable clothes for you.”

A rush of emotion overwhelmed Maggie. Realization dawned – she had misjudged Evan’s intentions. I was such an idiot for jumping to conclusions! He did this just to spend more time with me? Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt a sudden urge to reach out and touch his arm. “Oh my God, Evan, that’s so incredibly sweet!” His gesture touched her, melting away her defensiveness.

And what about Liz? How awesome is she? A genuine smile spread across her face. “Thank you so much – this is amazing. And please thank Liz for me. She’s an angel. She didn’t have to go through all that trouble.”

“No worries,” Evan reassured her. “Liz lives nearby and is always happy to help. And don’t worry about returning anything – she said they’re yours to keep or donate.”

Maggie smiled. “Well, at least make sure she knows how grateful I am. That was incredibly thoughtful.” With a hint of amused curiosity in her voice, she asked, “But wasn’t it weird, texting your sister that I might be sleeping over?”

“Liz is cool about things like this. Plus, she’d be more worried about me driving late at night. And she knows I have a guest room – she probably figures you’ll be staying there.”

Maggie pulled the pajamas from the small pile of clothing Liz had brought for her and followed Evan’s directions to the nearby bathroom. Evan ducked into his bedroom to change as well. When they reconvened in the living room, a tingling sensation flowed through Maggie at the sight of Evan in cozy sweatpants and a tight-fitting, worn-in t-shirt. Wow, he looks good, she couldn’t help but think. Contain yourself, Maggie. Remember, nothing’s going to happen tonight.

Maggie headed toward Evan, her cheeks slightly flushed. She was wearing oversized flannel pajamas that were a stark contrast to her earlier outfit. “Well,” she giggled, “I guess we’ve gone from dinner date to slumber party.”

Evan chuckled. “Hey, what can I say? My sister has her own unique sense of style.” He slowed his gaze, taking in all of Maggie. “Honestly, I think you look adorable.”

Maggie felt a flutter in her chest. “Thanks,” she managed, “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

Evan switched on the TV and pulled up his binge show. The show’s theme song blared from the TV, breaking the momentary tension. They settled onto the couch, and Evan reached out, drawing Maggie close. She smiled, leaning into him and tucking her feet beneath her. The ridiculous antics of the on-screen chefs elicited genuine laughter, and Maggie felt a deep sense of ease wash over her.

When the final episode ended, she met Evan’s hopeful gaze. Her desire warred with a lingering unease. Disguising her inner conflict with a performative stretch and yawn, she announced, “I think it’s time we get some sleep.” Sleep was the last thing on her mind, but she feared the temptation if they stayed up. Too soon, she reminded herself, but part of her desperately wanted to give in.

Evan turned off the TV. “Guest room’s upstairs, first door on the right. There’s a bathroom with everything you should need.”

“Perfect, thanks,” Maggie said and headed toward the stairs.

Before she could disappear from sight, Evan walked over to her and added, “Just so you know, my bedroom’s down here. I’ll leave the hall light on and my door open in case you need anything.”

Maggie paused, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “That sounds like an invitation.”

Evan’s grin mirrored hers. “You’re not going to start begging me to sleep with you again, are you?” he teased.

Maggie laughed. “Um…no. You give in far too easily.”

“I only mentioned the open door because your room is haunted,” Evan said with a straight face but a twinkle in his eye. “The whole house is haunted, except for my bedroom, of course.”

“Of course, not your bedroom,” Maggie said with a playful roll of her eyes.

He feigned exaggerated concern. “The ghosts are terrible pranksters – they might try to keep you awake all night.”

“In that case,” Maggie said, her voice dropping to a playful whisper, “I guess I’ll know where to find you if I have trouble sleeping.”

“I had a wonderful time tonight,” Evan confessed, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Hopefully, that was the best under $30 date you’ve had in a while.”

Though his words were lighthearted, this date had touched her in a way none ever had. Her eyes met his, her expression softening. “Evan,” she began, her voice barely a whisper, “that was the most amazing date I’ve ever had.”

A shimmer of desire passed between them. Their eyes met and held for a long moment before they shared a sweet, lingering kiss.

The kiss ended with Maggie stepping back, her eyes alight, as she bid Evan goodnight. He returned her smile, a fondness lingering in his chest. Yet, as she retreated to the guestroom, a strange unease settled over him. He replayed the night’s events – the laughter, the surprising ease between them, the sweetness of the kiss. His night with Maggie was good, great even. How could it feel so right and yet so wrong at the same time?

He couldn’t pinpoint the source of his inner conflict. Was it the unspoken promise of an annual relationship, the knowledge the end was already predetermined? Guilt echoed in his heart, an uncomfortable reminder that he was leading Maggie towards a destined heartbreak. Or was it something deeper... a whisper of loyalty to Sarah, a shadow of doubt about whether he could ever truly move on?

The questions lingered, unanswered, as Evan reached his bedroom door. He hesitated, hand on the knob, the room’s familiar tranquility suddenly offering little comfort against the storm of his thoughts.

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## Scene 28: "Maggie’s Futile Resistance"

The guest bedroom exuded an air of meticulous care. A queen-size bed, its crisp sheets tucked with practiced precision, dominated the space. The adjoining guest bathroom gleamed, a testament to thoughtful preparation. Hairdryer, stacks of fluffy towels, even individually wrapped toothbrushes – every conceivable need for an unexpected guest lay neatly in its place.

Maggie moved through her nightly routine with a familiar rhythm. She brushed her hair, the rhythmic strokes belying the frantic pulse of her thoughts. I don't have to sleep with him, she told herself, her grip firm on the hairbrush. It's just one night. Why make it complicated? With a sigh, she turned to the sink, removing her makeup with practiced efficiency.

Each swipe of the remover, each splash of water, was a tiny victory. I am strong. The mantra echoed in her head, yet as the last traces of mascara disappeared, so too did her manufactured resolve.

Switching off the bathroom light, she surveyed the perfectly made guest bed. It seemed to mock her with its emptiness, a stark reminder of the choice before her.

Maggie slipped off the flannel pajama bottoms with a barely audible sigh. Much better, I always get too warm wearing pants to bed anyway, she told herself, trying to ignore the real reason. She knew deep down she was ditching them because heading to Evan's room in baggy flannels wasn't exactly the vibe she wanted to go for.

A sigh, heavy with resignation, escaped Maggie's lips as she crossed to the starkly empty bed. With an exaggerated motion, she flung herself backward, arms wide, landing in the center of the pristine bedding. This moment of theatrical defiance was her final act of resistance; she gazed up at the ceiling, trying to convince herself that a fifteen-minute delay would somehow register as a minor victory against her inevitable surrender to the desire blazing within her.

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## Scene 29: "Maggie Sleeps With Evan"

Evan lay still beneath the covers, the stillness of his room a stark contrast to the turmoil in his mind. He hoped a relaxing shower before bed would help quiet his thoughts; instead, his racing mind danced from one consideration to the next. Tonight, ironically, the overthinking served a purpose. With so many different thoughts demanding attention in Evan's mind, he was unable to obsess over any single concern, particularly Sarah and the uncertainty of his new relationship plan.

A soft gasp drew his gaze. Maggie stood silhouetted in his doorway, the hallway light etching her figure against the darkness. For a moment, time seemed to freeze as he took in the curve of her hips, the gentle outline of her breasts beneath the fabric. His breath caught in his throat.

She lingered, as though waiting for him to acknowledge her presence. And in that instant, his mind achieved a strange sort of clarity. All his previously chaotic anxieties lined up like soldiers awaiting orders. A simple decision rose above the chaos: Was he ready to let go of the past, to embrace the woman standing before him, even if true love was not in the cards? Was he truly ready to embark on a new journey, one governed by a set of never-been-tested rules?

He couldn’t answer that right now. Not the whole question, at least. Pushing the weight of it to the back of his mind, Evan focused on Maggie.

“There’s a space for you right here,” Evan said, the words barely a whisper. He lifted the covers in a gentle invitation.

Maggie slipped into bed and laid on her back beside him, her movements careful, almost hesitant. Evan rolled onto his side, propping his head up on one hand. In the dim light, he could see the nervous in her eyes.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, his voice low and warm.

A smile touched Maggie’s lips, playfulness masking her vulnerability. “What kind of girlfriend would I be if I let my boyfriend sleep all by himself?”

Her nervousness shifted, no longer focused on the decision, but on the familiar jitters of a new physical encounter.

Evan couldn’t help but grin at her words. “Really? Didn’t think you were up for that yet.”

“I’m ready,” Maggie admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know what I was hesitating about. Fear, I guess.”

They kissed then, gentle, exploratory. Between soft, breathless sighs, Evan’s mind raced. Maggie’s words, her clear desire, forced him to confront the lingering specter of Sarah. It was time to let go. While no one could replace Sarah, Maggie was her own person – vibrant, warm, undeniably drawn to him. And though their connection was still young, something about it felt different than any other casual relationship.

His decision to move on from Sarah brought a different dilemma to the surface. Sleeping with Maggie meant their ‘year’ officially began. The thought echoed Guido’s words: all in, or all out. Evan couldn’t half-heartedly commit to Maggie, not when she deserved more than that. He wanted this, badly. He wanted Maggie.

One last obstacle remained. How could he be honest, at least partly, without revealing the full extent of his plan?

Evan’s words spilled out in a gentle rush. “Before things go any further, I need to be honest. I’ve only been with one woman for close to a decade. I haven’t been intimate with anyone for over a year. I can’t promise you where this is going.” He paused, searching her eyes for a hint of hesitation.

Maggie met his gaze, her expression a mix of understanding and a vulnerability that mirrored his own. “No promises needed, Evan. Neither of us can make those. We both have scars from the past to overcome.” She took a breath, her voice softer. “I like you. Really like you. And I want this, but I’ve been so focused on my own doubts and concerns, I haven’t stopped to consider if you’re ready. We can go slow. It doesn’t have to be tonight.”

It wasn’t just Maggie’s words, but the honesty behind them that resonated so deeply with Evan. All his doubts seemed to dissolve in that moment. His shoulders relaxed, dropping and spreading wide, his chest lifting forward, his head lifting slightly. I am ready. I‘m finally ready to let go of the past, he said to himself. It’s time to move on. “I like you too, a lot. And... I do want this,” he admitted, his voice thick with emotion. “But...I wasn’t sure I was ready. Until right now.”

The tension between them shifted. Words seemed unnecessary as desire and the promise of comfort ignited a silent understanding. Evan leaned closer, his touch feather-light against her cheek. And in that gentle meeting of hands and lips, their hesitation dissolved.

Somehow, their different journeys had led them to the same place. This common ground offered a feeling of safety, a stable foundation for them to pursue physical intimacy in their relationship. While not born from pure passion, true love, or raw chemistry, it was special in its own way – a space for both active care and quiet healing. With the path ahead now clear, Maggie and Evan consummated their unlabeled connection.

...And so, Rule #8 took effect, marking the start of their year together. There was no turning back now. Things just got very real.

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## Scene 30: "Evan’s Scrambled Disaster"

Sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, casting a warm glow over Evan as he hummed a nameless tune and whisked up eggs in a bowl. His earlier anxieties had vanished in the calm contentment of the morning. After a year and a half, this was his first morning waking up beside a woman – not with the ache of loss and loneliness, but with a quiet sense of ease.

A soft noise drew his attention to the doorway. Maggie stood there, sleep still clinging to the edges of her smile, Her flannel `pajama top clinging to her curves. “Good morning! How are you feeling this morning?” Evan asked, affection flooding his voice.

Maggie stretched, a soft yawn escaping her lips, then sauntered towards him and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Wonderful! You?”

His grin widened. “Incredible! Can I get you something to drink?”

Maggie winked and stole his glass. “Perfect!”

Evan chuckled at Maggie’s spirited antics, filling another glass with orange juice. As he savored his drink, Maggie strolled over to the dining room table, where Liz’s thoughtful ensemble of clothes from the previous night still lay.

Evan watched, amusement crinkling his eyes as she unashamedly removed her pajama top, wearing nothing underneath. Her casual confidence ignited a soft light inside him, diverging from desire, echoing sentiments of genuine affection. She slipped on the sweatpants and held up the sweatshirt before trying it on. “Liz has good taste!”

“I love how comfortable you are after our first night together,” he said. “Guido says when he sleeps with a woman for the first time, she usually darts to the bathroom first thing in the morning to brush her hair and put her makeup on.”

“Well, I figure you’ve already seen the goods, no point in hiding anything,” she replied, a mischievous glint in her eyes. She pulled on Liz’s soft sweater. When her head had emerged she paused, looking straight at Evan. A cute, slightly goofy smile spread across her makeup-free face. “Here I am. What you see is what you get! If you don’t like it, now’s the time to bail.”

Evan’s chuckle was genuine. “I love that attitude! And trust me, I have absolutely zero complaints about what I see.”

A teasing smile played on Maggie’s lips. “Always happy to please. I’m gonna go upstairs to brush my teeth. I’ll be back in a few.”

“I’ll start breakfast while you do that,” Evan said, the idea of playing the role of doting boyfriend filling him with unexpected satisfaction.

A few minutes later, Maggie returned, a hint of rose in her cheeks. She kissed him lightly and peered over his shoulder. “What are you making?”

His heart gave a funny little skip as her breath brushed against his neck. He gestured towards the pan where a lumpy, slightly overcooked concoction resided. “An omelet,” he said, unable to hide a note of pride.

Maggie’s gaze was incredulous. “That’s not an omelet. That’s a scrambled disaster.” Before he could protest, she’d scooped his creation into the trash.

Evan feigned offense. “Hey! I thought you didn’t like to waste money. It may look bad, but it probably tasted good.”

Maggie’s answering kiss was a playful apology. “I do appreciate the effort,” she said, sincerity in her eyes, “but food must look as good as it tastes. The first thing I learned how to cook was an omelet. Grab me those eggs, and I’ll show you how to make a great omelet.”

Maggie moved around the kitchen with graceful efficiency. A wave of relief washed over Evan as he leaned against the counter. Last night had been... good. Comfortable. Everything he’d wanted, even if the earth hadn’t exactly moved. And this morning? Easy. Natural. Proof that his year-long relationship plan might actually work. A year of companionship, of building a genuine connection without a true love requirement. It could be great for both himself and Maggie.

# Chapter 7: "Subplots & Support Systems"

## Scene 31: "Chloe’s Turn to Support Liz"

It was a cold mid-November day in Chicagoland, a brisk wind announcing that winter was arriving early this year. Liz gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white against the faded leather. Every mile closer to Evan’s house felt like a weight added to her chest. The clinic’s sterile verdict echoed in her mind—negative. All that hope, all that effort, reduced to a single, devastating word. A hot tear escaped, tracing a path down her cheek before she angrily swiped it away. She needed to be strong for Evan. He was dealing with his own struggles, the familiar, inexplicable exhaustion that dragged at him like an anchor.

While Chloe’s unscheduled calls often arrived with a flurry of manufactured drama, Liz’s heart always skipped a beat when her best friend’s name flashed on the screen. But today, with her own pain a crushing weight, she wasn’t sure she could muster up the energy to field whatever crisis Chloe had cooked up this time. Yet, a deep yearning for connection, for even the echo of Chloe’s effervescent spirit, made her hand hover over the answer button. She cleared her throat and hit answer, attempting her usual playful tone.

“So, what’s the latest drama, Chloe? Boyfriend problems again?” Even to her own ears, the lightness sounded forced.

“Always,” Chloe’s familiar giggle came through. “And Rebecca is driving me crazy as usual, but that’s not why I called. Liz...I just had this feeling...like I needed to check in.” Chloe paused, her voice softening. “Is everything okay?”

Liz’s attempt at composure began to fray. “I’m fine. Just driving over to help a friend who’s not feeling well.” Despite her best efforts, a hint of sadness crept into her voice, a subtle tremor that likely wouldn’t be detected by anyone but Chloe.

Liz always respected Evan’s intensely private nature, even though she often wished he’d open up more. This was why she used the generic term “friend”—even with someone as close as Chloe, discussing Evan’s health struggles felt like a betrayal of his trust.

Chloe’s sharp intuition cut through any pretense. “Liz,” her tone was gentle, yet insistent, “I know there’s more to it than that. I can feel your pain all the way from St. Louis. Please, talk to me.”

The dam broke. Sobs wracked Liz’s body, a release of pent-up pain and disappointment too heavy to bear alone. While she encouraged honesty and emotional vulnerability in others, she rarely practiced it herself. Sparing those she cared about from her own burdens was a reflex, but with Chloe, there was no point. “The IVF,” she choked out, “It didn’t work. It failed. I’m never going to be a mom!” And then, a different kind of surge – an overwhelming wave of gratitude. “Chloe, how do you always know when something’s wrong? I love you so much.”

Chloe’s voice trembled in response, mirroring Liz’s heartache. “I love you too. Liz, don’t give up. You’re going to be a mom someday; I just know it! I wish I could be there, give you the biggest hug ever.” Liz’s tears brought Chloe’s own, their shared grief flowing like a river, binding them in a sisterhood strong as steel.

As the initial wave of sorrow ebbed, they soothed each other with whispered reassurances of care, longing, and reminders of their unshakable connection. Then, as Liz pulled into Evan’s driveway, an inspiring idea emerged.

“Hey, why don’t you fly up here? I’ll buy your ticket!” Liz’s voice held a tentative hope.

Chloe sighed, a mix of longing and resignation. “You know I wish I could. I haven’t seen you in forever. Between my boyfriend, Mr. Jealousy, my babysitting duties for my niece and nephew, and work…it’s just impossible. But hey, what about you coming down here? A girls-only weekend would do you good. We could find a babysitter for the kids – Rebecca needs a break. We could drink wine to our hearts’ content.”

The thought of escaping to Chloe and Rebecca’s chaotic yet energizing world offered a glimmer of light. “That would be wonderful,” Liz admitted, “The thing is…being a business owner now, it’s hard to get away. Let me see what I can do, though.”

The conversation ended on a note of possibility. Liz felt lighter, the weight of her pain eased by sharing it with Chloe. “I’m at my friend’s house now. Gotta go,” she said, her voice steadier. A final exchange of “love yous”, and the call ended, leaving Liz with a bittersweet mix of gratitude and longing to see the friend who was more like the little sister she never had, always sensing when she was needed most.

Liz took a steadying breath as she approached Evan’s door. After a tearful drive and a heart-wrenching call with Chloe, the weight of her failed IVF was heavy. This isn’t about me, she reminded herself fiercely. It’s about Evan. She resolved to push her own pain aside, at least for now.

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## Scene 32: "Evan's Health & Fried Bologna"

Evan heard the familiar click of the door and knew Liz was there, even before her footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor. A wave of gratitude washed over him, immediately followed by a twinge of apprehension. Liz was the best sister a guy could ask for, most of the time. He loved her dearly, but sometimes she could be a bit...much. Especially when it came to his health. He braced himself for the inevitable. “You really need to see a specialist” speech and hoped she’d cut him some slack today.

“You don’t look so good, Evan. How are you feeling?” she asked, dropping onto the couch at a right angle to his chair.

Evan straightened slightly, a touch of defensiveness crossing his face before he plastered on a smile. “Just a little rundown, that’s all. Nothing to worry about. Fit as a fiddle!”

“It’s been almost a year since your last energy-drop episode. I was hoping maybe they were gone for good.” Her voice held a tremor beneath its cautious hope.

Evan sighed, and a shadow crossed his face. “Me too. It’s my own fault. I haven’t been getting as much rest as I should. “ Evan paused, the familiar cadence of his words suddenly hollow, before continuing with a forced enthusiasm. “Yeah, so I get tired once in a while; who doesn’t?”

Liz’s hands clenched in her lap. “I really wish you would see a specialist, Evan.”

Evan sighed, an inward eye roll accompanying the audible exhale. Here we go with the specialists. I knew it! “Can we please not talk about this again? We made an agreement. I get an extremely thorough physical every year, and if I don’t get a clean bill of health, I’ll consider seeing a specialist. I take good care of myself, and the physicals never indicate any problems.” The familiar strain echoed in his voice.

“I know. But a specialist might be able to catch something that the physicals miss.”

Evan’s jaw tightened. How many times do I have to remind her? “You know how I feel about doctors, particularly specialists. They’ll manufacture some sort of diagnosis that requires me to take some kind of medicine they prescribe. They get kickbacks from the pharmaceutical companies. Come on, Liz, you know how I feel about taking pharmaceutical drugs for any prolonged length of time. Even the helpful ones are toxic.”

Liz started to argue with Evan again, but the familiar frustration bubbled up. This was a debate they’d had countless times. Evan braced for yet another rebuttal. Nothing’s wrong with me! Why can’t she just accept that?

The look on Evan’s face told Liz she was distressing him, and she had to admit to herself that she did agree to his yearly checkup as a compromise. With a sigh, she forced herself to shift gears.

“When’s the last time you had anything to eat?” she asked, a note of concern threading through her voice.

Evan hesitated. “I had a protein shake this morning,” he admitted, knowing she wouldn’t like the answer.

Liz pressed her lips together, her usual fussing instincts rising. “Let me cook you something. What are you craving?”

A hint of a smile - a welcome sight given his weakened state - touched Evan’s face. He was, in truth, starving, but the idea of cooking seemed impossible before Liz arrived. “You’re going to laugh, but... I miss those silly fried bologna sandwiches you used to make for me. Remember, when we were kids, and I occasionally experienced these brief energy lulls?” He gestured vaguely. “I always felt better after eating them.”

A warmth crept into Liz’s expression, a shimmer of shared nostalgia. “Honestly, I miss those too. Don’t tell a soul, but I secretly love them just as much as you do. Does a glass of milk still go with the deal?”

Evan’s energy surged slightly, a testament to the power of simple comfort. “Of course.” A smile played on his lips. “What else?”

Liz hummed a tuneless melody as she flipped a bologna slice in the skillet, a familiar rhythm from their childhood. The sizzle of the bologna filled the room, a comforting scent mingling with the warmth of shared memories. Despite a lingering ache beneath the surface, lightness bubbled up from a well of childhood comfort, a tiny glimmer of joy amidst recent disappointment.

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## Scene 33: "Evan Updates Liz About Maggie"

A fresh wave of curiosity washed over Liz. “So, how are things with Maggie?” she asked, glancing over towards Evan, who was still settled in his recliner.

His voice drifted from the family room, still carrying a hint of fatigue but buoyed by a touch of enthusiasm.”It’s only been a few weeks, but everything’s going according to plan. We’re getting along great! Though...” He rubbed a hand through his hair, a hint of tiredness returning. “...I might have underestimated the energy it takes to drive back and forth to the western burbs for our dates and for the classes I teach down south.”

Liz turned, a bologna slice poised on the spatula. “Are you sticking to the rules?” A trace of skepticism laced her tone, but mostly, it held a sister’s concern.

Evan chuckled. “Yep! Well...” His smile faltered slightly. “There might be one rule I’m struggling with.”

A frown creased Liz’s lips. “That doesn’t sound good. Which one?”

“I know I’m not supposed to get close to her inner circle. But Laura, her roommate... she works from home a lot, so I see her around. We get along great—like peas in a pod!” A spark lit his eyes. “It’s purely a friendship, but I really like her.” He trailed off, a wave of nausea washing over him at the thought of the inevitable breakup. “And that makes me worry about what that’ll mean when it comes time to end my relationship with Maggie.”

Liz slid a sandwich onto a small plate and walked it over to Evan, setting it on the end table alongside a glass of milk. “So, are you convinced... you won’t fall for Maggie?” The disappointment was clear in her voice.

Evan’s smile returned, but it held less carefree enthusiasm. “Maggie’s fantastic! I definitely see her as more than a friend. But true love...” He reached for his glass and sipped his milk. “It’s just not... not that.”

Seeing the downturn of Liz’s lips, he pushed on. “Trust me, Liz, this is a solid, healthy relationship. We make each other better. Honestly, I didn’t think my plan would work this well. Couldn’t be happier.”

Liz turned back to the kitchen to grab her own sandwich, a smile tugging at her lips. Returning to the family room, she found Evan’s plate empty, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. Cheeks bulging, he held up the last bite of his sandwich, a playful glint in his eyes. “Oh my God, this tastes so good,” he mumbled through a mouthful of food, the words slightly muffled. “This hit the spot!”

Seeing his enthusiasm warmed Liz’s heart. “Looks like you need seconds,” she chuckled, handing him her sandwich. “I’ll make myself another one.” She turned to head back to the kitchen, a wave of tenderness washing over her. This, these small moments of shared laughter and comfort... this was what mattered.

By the time Liz finished cooking her sandwich and returned to the family room, Evan had slowed down but was still savoring his second delectable sandwich, a look of satisfaction in his eyes.

“Your spirits have been lifted lately,” Liz observed, settling into the couch perpendicular to him. “I can’t argue with the results.”

A grin spread across Evan’s face. “Exactly! And I’m confident Maggie’s happier, too.”

“Speaking of…” Liz paused. “Did Maggie get everything sorted with her car?”

Evan’s gaze dropped. A hint of guilt mingled with satisfaction. “Yep, running like a dream.”

“Why the guilty look then?” Liz frowned slightly.

Evan chuckled, but a nervous edge remained in his voice. “Maggie’s car was on its last legs. A piece of junk, really. So... I took it to Frankie’s Garage. You know he loves us, gets half his business from the team...”

Liz nodded, a flicker of apprehension crossing her face. She knew where this was headed.

“...I explained the situation, and he offered to charge only for the parts, no labor.” Evan hesitated, then rushed on. “He rebuilt the engine, the transmission, and even threw in barely used tires he took off a wrecked car. When he was done, he was so proud of the work that he couldn’t bear to release it, looking like junk. So, he threw in a paint job. The thing is, even without charging labor, the repairs ended up costing...” He swallowed. “More than double what the car’s worth.”

Liz winced. “Dare I ask how much?”

Evan’s eyes widened, and he shook his head emphatically. “Believe me,” he sighed, “you don’t want to know.” He paused, then added, “Of course, I covered it all. But with Maggie’s money issues and the way she hates feeling like a charity case... I stretched the truth.”

“Oh, God,” Liz murmured. “Stretched it how?”

Evan’s fingers traced a pattern on the armrest. “I had Frankie write up the invoice for only five hundred dollars and told Maggie the invoice was lower than normal because Frankie granted me some favors for sending business his way. Even with that, I had to work hard to get Maggie to accept the repairs as my early Christmas gift to her. Honestly, I don’t know what I would’ve done if Laura wasn’t there to help me.”

Liz sighed, a mix of pride and concern warring within her. “Evan, that’s amazing of you. And yes, you’re both making each other happier, that’s clear.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “But with this whole plan... these little white lies, they add up.”

Evan met her gaze, a touch of shame clouding his features. “I know. But I haven’t told a flat-out lie, not yet.” He leaned forward, an almost pleading note in his voice. “Besides, I’m truly adding value to her life, right? Isn’t that the important part?”

Liz didn’t respond, but a knowing smile touched her lips laced with a hint of skepticism. The weight of the day seemed to lift, replaced by a symphony of old stories and forgotten laughter that seemed to weave its own kind of magic.

The last crumbs vanished, and with them a lingering echo of childhood. Evan stretched with a sigh, a bit of his usual energy returning. “So much better,” he declared, a sleepy smile on his face. “That was delicious.”

Liz chuckled, reaching for the empty plates. “Who knew a fried bologna sandwich could be a cure-all?”

A thoughtful silence descended after she moved to the kitchen. Evan stared into the fading sunlight filtering through the window, the familiar shape of the old oak tree in the front yard stirring a bittersweet pang within him. Liz returned to her seat next to Evan.

“I don’t tell you enough,” he began, voice soft but carrying a newfound weight, “how grateful I am. For everything you’ve done. You’ve taken care of me since we were little, and you’re still doing it.” With a grateful smile, he reached out, the caring touch between them familiar. “I don’t know where I’d be without you, Liz. Thank you.

Her eyes glistened, mirroring the fading sunlight. The weight of her recent disappointment mingled with a sudden, overwhelming surge of love. Liz choked back a sob, unable to find words quite yet.

“Evan,” she finally whispered, voice thick with unshed tears, “you have no idea how much I needed to hear those words tonight.”

# Chapter 8: "The Scholarship Scheme: Preparation"

## Scene 34: "Maggie Decides to Quit School"

A blast of icy wind rattled the window panes of Maggie and Laura’s old apartment, a stark contrast to the cozy warmth inside. Vintage Christmas carols played softly in the background as Maggie and Evan curled up on the worn floral couch, a sense of settled ease flowing between them.

It was early December, and with Laura out Christmas shopping with her boyfriend, they had the place to themselves. It had been five weeks since their relationship officially began, and they’d fallen into a comfortable rhythm, sharing meals between school and work shifts and quiet afternoons like this. However, in the soft light, Evan noticed a shadow in Maggie’s usually bright eyes.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Evan’s voice was soft, laced with concern.

Maggie sighed, the weight of her decision settling like the snowfall outside. “After this semester, I think I’m going to take a break from school for a while.”

Evan blinked. “But you only have a year and a half left. Why stop so close to the finish?”

A forced smile touched Maggie’s lips. “I’m always stressed,” she said, her fingers fidgeting with a loose thread on her Christmas sweater, “and we don’t get to see each other as much as I’d like. If I wasn’t juggling school and two jobs, we could hang out more. Maybe life would slow down a little.” Her voice drifted off, leaving her unspoken anxieties hanging in the air.

A wave of guilt washed over Evan, followed by a jolt of panic that tightened his chest. Had his plan backfired? Was she hinting that she wanted to quit school to be with him? He couldn’t let her sacrifice her future over a year-long relationship!

Evan frowned slightly. “Of course, I’d love to see more of you,” he said, “but I’m not complaining, Maggie. Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve thought it through.” Maggie’s words sounded more determined than convincing, the weariness etching itself deeper in the lines of her face. “I need this break.”

“Well, you know I’ll support you, no matter what.” Evan squeezed her hand. “I want you to be happy. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Maggie’s expression softened. “Just keep being you. You’ve been amazing.” Her voice held a touch of melancholy gratitude. “I’ve never been happier with someone. It’s just…” She trailed off, then shook her head. “The workload, that’s all.”

Evan hesitated. A knot of worry twisted in his gut. Her explanation felt...off, somehow. She wouldn’t lie, would she? Oh my God, what have I done? Her giving up school to be with me was never part of the plan. This is a disaster! His stomach churned uneasily.

“Can we not talk about this anymore?” Maggie’s voice held a hint of pleading. “I just want to cuddle for a while, forget about everything.”

Evan nodded, trying to mask the growing panic inside him. He pulled her closer, seeking a connection to ground him in this chaotic moment. But as they sat in the dimly lit room, the Christmas music a distant hum, the worry gnawing at him intensified. Something was wrong. Evan’s heart hammered against his ribs. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Her quitting school would change everything!

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## Scene 35: "Laura Tells Evan the Real Reason"

Evan stayed the night, a testament to Maggie’s unspoken plea for comfort. Yet as the first rays of dawn seeped through the blinds, sleep evaded him. The initial jolt of panic had dulled, a sliver of hope weaving through the lingering worry. Maybe he’d overreacted, misinterpreting her exhaustion for something more? But even with that thought, a nagging unease remained, a whisper in his mind demanding a clearer understanding of her motivations. Answers, that’s what he needed.

Breakfast had been a quiet affair, more ritual than sustenance. Maggie bustled about, preparing for school, a determined smile masking her fatigue. Laura emerged from her room, yawning, and poured herself a bowl of cereal. This was his chance. Using a need for milk as an excuse, Evan drifted closer to Laura, his pulse quickening as he leaned in.

Glancing over his shoulder, Evan made sure Maggie was still focused on her packing before reaching for the milk. Then, using the carton as a prop, he leaned closer to Laura. His whisper was barely audible, words hidden amongst the ordinary sounds of morning.

A hint of surprise flashed in Laura’s eyes. She cast a quick look towards Maggie, then turned back to Evan. In a barely perceptible gesture, a nod so subtle it could have been missed, she assented. An unspoken understanding passed between them.

Maggie, oblivious to interaction, caught their brief exchange. “What are you two whispering about?” she asked, a hint of playfulness masking her unease. “Do I need to be worried?”

A flash of guilt crossed Evan’s face, quickly replaced by a disarming smile. Laura, ever the quick thinker, intervened, “Just discussing your Christmas present. Top-secret stuff.” Her attempt at a playful tone fell slightly flat, a hint of nervous laughter lacing her words.

Though Laura’s explanation seemed reasonable, the flash of concern on Evan’s face and Laura’s nervous giggle left a subtle question mark in Maggie’s mind. She knew better than to doubt their friendship—Evan and Laura had clicked from the start—yet the playful way they teased each other sometimes planted a seed of uncertainty. Maggie laughed lightly at her own fleeting thought, but she had wondered more than once when the three were out in public if a stranger would peg her or Laura as Evan’s girlfriend.

As Evan rinsed his milk glass, a surge of anticipation zipped through him. He met Maggie’s eyes, “You all set?” When Maggie turned to gather her things, Evan shot Laura a covert glance. It was the wordless confirmation, the go-ahead signal for the next step of their plan.

Evan walked Maggie to her car, kissed her briefly, then went to his. Trying to avoid raising suspicion, he pulled out of his parking spot at the same time as Maggie. They drove in opposite directions – Maggie south towards school, Evan north towards the highway.

Once he believed he was safely out of sight, Evan swung into a convenience store parking lot. After ensuring no one had followed, he got back on the road and headed back to Maggie and Laura’s apartment.

Evan knocked on the door, and Laura answered quickly, a dash of worry crossing her face.

“Maggie’s going to be furious if she finds out,” she said quietly. “Promise me this will never get back to her.”

“I promise,” Evan said sincerely.

“Okay, hurry. Get in here before someone sees you.” Laura stepped back to let him enter. Once inside, his eyes immediately went to the window. After a brief assessment, he relaxed.

“The coast is clear,” he reported.

Laura and Evan sat at the kitchen table, tension filled in the air.

“I assume you know why I wanted to talk?” Evan asked, his voice low.

Laura toyed with the edge of a napkin, meeting his gaze briefly. “I have my suspicions. But go ahead, fill me in.”

“What’s going on with Maggie?” Evan’s tone was gentle, yet insistent. “I know there’s more to this than she’s letting on. Why is she quitting school?”

Laura hesitated. “Maggie swore me to secrecy. She doesn’t want you to know.”

“Know what?” He pressed.

Laura sighed. She hated to break her promise, but maybe Evan could help. “It’s... money,” she admitted reluctantly. “Turns out there are limits to student loans, and with her hours getting cut... she can’t afford tuition, let alone her share of living expenses.”

Evan let out a breath, half sigh, half a disbelieving chuckle. “Thank God,” he murmured. He thought, Whew, she’s not leaving to be with me after all. That’s a relief. Catching Laura’s startled expression, he quickly regained his composure, focusing on the matter at hand. “I figured it was something like that,” he said with newfound seriousness. “She’s so close to finishing, she can’t quit now!”

“That’s what I told her!” Laura exclaimed, a touch of desperation in her voice. “But with no loan, there’s no way...”

“How much would it take?” Evan interrupted, a thoughtful glint in his eyes. “To finish school, to cover her bills... how much does she need?”

Laura blinked. “It’s a lot. Maybe fifteen thousand total?”

Evan nodded slowly. “And there’s no way she’d let me help her financially?” He knew the answer even as he asked, but had to be sure.

Laura shook her head emphatically. “Absolutely not. That’s why she was so adamant about keeping this from you. She still feels guilty about the car—and she still thinks that only cost five hundred, remember? Fifteen thousand... it’s way too much, Evan. She’d never accept it.”

Evan’s eyes narrowed in determination. “The money’s no problem. We just need a way to get it to her without bruising that pride of hers. We can’t let her quit school! Do you have any thoughts?”

Laura stared blankly back at him.

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the ticking of the kitchen clock. Minutes passed as they racked their brains, searching for a solution. Then, an excited gleam sparked in Evan’s eyes.

“I think I’ve got it!” he exclaimed, a surge of energy replacing his earlier worry.

Laura’s own expression brightened. “Spill it! What have you come up with?”

Evan hesitated, a playful grin spreading across his face. “Not yet. It’s still half-baked, and I don’t want to get your hopes up unnecessarily. But I need some expert advice. When’s her tuition due?”

“First week of January,” Laura replied.

“Perfect! That gives me time to work.” Evan bounced to his feet, a sense of urgency radiating from him. “I’d better get started!”

“Wait, you can’t leave!” Laura protested, her curiosity piqued. “What’s your idea?”

Evan headed for the door, a mischievous sparkle in his eye. “You’ll find out soon enough! I promise.” He paused, then added, “Besides, the best surprises are worth waiting for.” With a wink, he was out the door, leaving Laura consumed by a tantalizing mixture of hope and anticipation.

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## Scene 36: "Laura and Evan Hatch a Plan"

Laura couldn’t sit still. Each tick of the kitchen clock seemed to drag. She paced to the window, peering out, then back to the door. When Evan’s car finally pulled into the parking lot, relief washed over her, quickly replaced by a surge of impatient energy.

When Laura saw Evan enter the building, she bolted from the window to the apartment’s front door, flinging it open. From the sound of his footsteps, he seemed to be crawling up the stairs at a snail’s pace—or perhaps he was moving in slow motion. Every creak of the ancient wood under his feet sent a jolt through her. By the time Evan reached the top, she was practically hopping from foot to foot, waving her arms wildly. “Come on, come on!” A week of anticipation buzzed through her like a swarm of angry bees, and the playful swat to his arm was an inevitable release. “That’s for keeping me in suspense all week!”

Evan chuckled, rubbing his bicep. Ouch, but the look on her face was worth it. “I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure we could pull this off,” Evan explained.

“We?” Laura cocked an eyebrow. “And what exactly is ‘this’?”

They settled at the kitchen table, Evan’s fingers drumming a quick rhythm against the worn wood. He pulled out his laptop, the screen flickering to life. “I’ll need your help. But fair warning – we might have to… let’s say, compromise our integrity a bit to keep Maggie from figuring things out. Are you up for that?” He met her gaze, a hint of mischief in his eyes. Liz’s voice a playful nag in his head—”Evan, another white lie? You know they catch up with you...”

Laura’s stomach fluttered—not with guilt, but with anticipation. “If it helps Maggie stay in school, I’m in! “ Evan felt a surge of relief, not just for Maggie, but for himself. Maybe Liz was right most of the time, but there are exceptions to her no white-lie philosophy. This was definitely one of them. We’re doing something good here.

Evan took a deep breath. “I think I found a way to get Maggie to accept financial assistance... and she won’t even suspect a thing.”

Laura sat up straighter. “A miracle? Do tell.”

“A scholarship!” he declared. A wide grin spread across his face.

“Wait... explain. How?” Laura leaned forward, intrigued.

“My attorney walked me through it all. We’re going to set up a completely anonymous scholarship fund. Now, here’s the clever bit,” Evan’s eyes twinkled, “The ‘McCarthy Irish American Culinary Scholarship.’”

Laura’s smile widened. “I love it already!”

“My lawyer said this has to be legit. So, we’ll post it somewhere official, but I won’t advertise it widely. Maggie should be the only one who knows about it. It’ll be framed as a one-time holiday gift,” Evan explained, excitement building in his voice. “We’ll open applications this week, and you’ll need to convince Maggie to apply online. Can you do that?”

“Absolutely! Consider it done,” Laura replied, her own enthusiasm growing.

Evan nodded. “The money can go towards tuition, living expenses, anything as long as she’s a full-time student. There’s a small chance we’ll get other applicants. To make sure Maggie wins, we need a trusted selection committee... one without me on it.” He winked at Laura, “That’ll be you. Make sure Maggie wins, no matter what. My lawyer will have some paperwork for you—alright with all that?”

“Evan, this is genius!” Laura exclaimed. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

“Important detail,” Evan added, his tone turning serious. “We can’t tell Maggie a thing. Once the fund’s there, it has to go to an Irish American culinary student. If she rejected the scholarship, you’d have to pick someone else.”

Laura’s smile didn’t fade. Her hands clapped together in a quick, giddy flurry. “I can’t believe we’re going to do this! I’m so excited!” Her enthusiasm soared—not just for the plan, but the thrill of being part of it.

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## Scene 37: "Laura Applies for the Scholarship"

Laura practically bounced in her chair, unable to contain her excitement. Nestled in a corner of the living room, she sat at her small desk, surrounded by clutter. Maggie bustled in the kitchen, preparing dinner. Laura took a deep breath, steadying herself. Time to commence Operation Scholarship—it’s go time. With a flourish, she clicked the link Evan had sent, the scholarship website opening before her. Now, how to convince Maggie after so many disappointments? A surge of optimism countered the familiar twinge of doubt.

“Hey, Maggie,” she began, a touch too brightly, while Maggie sliced vegetables at the counter. “I found something while looking online. A scholarship that might be perfect. It’s kind of a holiday thing, and they’re only taking applications this week. Just think, you could know by Christmas Eve!”

Maggie didn’t even turn around, her voice tired. “What’s the point, Laura? I’ve tried so many, gotten my hopes up... I’m okay with leaving school, really.”

Laura’s smile wavered. Frustration prickled under her skin. Maggie can’t give up now! “Maggie, please. Just give this one a shot. For me? I’ll even fill out the whole application. All you have to do is sign a thing they email you.”

Maggie finally turned, a sign of resignation in her eyes. “I don’t want to get excited just to be let down again, Laura. The break will be good for me.”

A jolt of determination surged through Laura. This had to work. “So. Can I fill out the application on your behalf?” Laura asked.

Maggie sighed, shoulders slumping. “Fine. Do what you want. But I’m not getting involved.”

A flare of triumph rose in Laura. Phase one, almost there! Fingers flying across the keyboard, she filled out the application in record time, hardly able to contain her excitement. Maggie turned back to her vegetables, a resigned sigh escaping her. With a final flourish, Laura hit ‘submit’, then paused... all she needed was that e-signature. Now, how to get it without raising suspicion?

She grinned at Maggie, struggling to keep her voice casual. “They need your e-signature to finalize it. Can you check your email?” Laura eye’d Maggie’s phone sitting on the nearby table. Every muscle in her body wanted to leap up and snatch it. “If you let me use your phone, I can do it for you.”

Maggie sighed. “Go ahead. You can waste your time if you want to. Nothing’s going to come of it.”

A surge of adrenaline shot through Laura. She practically dove for the table, scooping up Maggie’s phone with hands that trembled ever so slightly. Fighting the urge to do a victory dance, she focused on the screen, completing the e-signature with a series of swift taps. Then, swtiching to her own phone, the text to Evan practically writing itself: “Operation Scholarship: Phase One completed!”

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## Scene 38: "You Forgot the Stamp"

The aroma of roasted coffee beans and hushed conversations filled the air as Laura and Evan chose a nondescript coffee shop far from Maggie's culinary school territory. They huddled in a shadowy corner, a buzz of excitement crackling between them. Evan slouched low in his seat, glanced around nervously. With deliberate stealth, he placed the letter-sized, unmarked envelope on the table as if delivering classified documents. One last quick scan of the room, then he slid it across with a single finger, a hint of a playful smirk on his face.

Laura, played along, mirroring his spy-like theatrics, slipped the envelope open with a conspiratorial air, revealing its contents. A congratulatory letter, naming Maggie the winner of the ‘McCarthy Irish American Culinary Scholarship’. A yellow sticker marked “Sign Here” on the second document made it clear that she was accepting her role as the sole member of the scholarship selection committee. Yet, something else remained inside... With a quick shake, a cashier’s check for a staggering $15,000 fluttered onto the table, made out directly to Maggie O’Brian.

Her eyes widened. “Evan, this is... wow.” Despite the urgency in her voice, her hand moved with practiced authority, signing the document without hesitation. “I didn't think you give her the whole amount, all at once. Are you, like, secretly rich?”

Evan looked down, his expression a mix of modesty and slight discomfort. “Nah, not really. It’s more like, well... my monthly expenses are minimal. I have no mortgage or car payments. Plus, I rent out my mountain cabin when I’m not there. Keeps me comfortable, I guess.”

Laura leaned in, eyes wide. “Seriously? How long does it take you to make...” she gulped, “...fifteen grand?”

Evan explained. “Liz takes a salary from the foundation for the day-to-day stuff. Since I mostly volunteer, I don’t. That way, I can sneak off to the cabin whenever I need a break.”

Laura interrupted, a playful awe in her voice. “You’re living my dream!” A wistful sigh escaped her. “But wait... if you don’t take a salary, how...”

Evan shrugged, trying to downplay it. “My income’s from company profits. It varies, but a week or two usually does the trick, whether I’m working or relaxing at the cabin. And hey,” he added, a touch of earnestness in his voice, “I’d much rather see this money help Maggie than just sit in the bank doing nothing.”

“Wow, I had no idea!” Laura exclaimed. “Okay, so what’s next?”

Evan picked up the cashier’s check and the congratulatory letter. With quick efficiency, he folded the letter and tucked both into an envelope already addressed to Maggie’s apartment. A swift lick sealed the flap tight.

He handed the letter to Laura. “Slip this into your stack of mail tomorrow,” he instructed. “And make absolutely sure Maggie’s the one who opens it.”

Laura’s eyes fell on the envelope, and a frown creased her brow. “Evan... You forgot the stamp! Maggie will know it wasn’t mailed to her if there’s no stamp on the envelope.” She couldn’t hide a touch of exasperated amusement. “We gotta be sharper than this, or we’ll get busted!”

Evan’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Oops. You’re absolutely right. Can you take care of that?”

“Of course. I was thinking. We should both be there when she opens it. Our Christmas Eve party doesn’t start until 7 p.m. Why don’t you come over A couple of hours earlier? This way, we can make this happen before the guests arrive,” Laura suggested.

“Gotcha!” Evan paused after a moment of thought. “Do you... I mean, do you think this has any chance of working?” Evan’s usual confidence seemed to waver slightly.

“Hell no! Laura laughed, but the sound caught in her throat. “But hey, what else can we try?”

Evan gave a hesitant nod. “You’re probably right. We should both brainstorm some ideas tonight, just in case she catches on. If worst comes to worst, we can fall back on an old, reliable tactic that’s worked for me in similar situations.”

“What’s that?” Laura’s curiosity was piqued.

“We’ll remind her that if the situation were reversed, she’d do the same for me in a heartbeat, and she wouldn’t want me to refuse this opportunity.”

Laura grinned, a spark of mischief in her eyes. “Genius! Anything else in your bag of tricks?”

“Nope, I think we’re all set for tomorrow.”

“Well then, Operation Scholarship: Phase Two is officially completed!”

They leaned across the table, not for a handshake, but a high-five that crackled with nervous energy.

As Evan left the coffee shop, a sense of apprehension lingered. His plan was outlandish, a long shot at best. Yet, a spark of hope remained alive within him. Maybe, just maybe, this crazy scheme might actually work.

# Chapter 9: "The Scholarship Scheme: Execution"

## Scene 39: "What’s taking him so long?"

Maggie carefully arranged bite-sized hors d’oeuvres on a platter, her every movement precise and focused. Laura, in stark contrast, practically vibrated with nervous energy. Her fingers jittered across her phone screen, and her off-key humming grated on her own ears. A silent countdown thrummed through her head.

Evan’s never late, Laura thought. A cold dread began to seep in. Where could he be?

She sent a quick, panicked text to Evan: “You’re late! Where are you?!” As if in response, Maggie looked up from her intricate plating. Laura hastily swiped to the weather app, pretending to be suddenly engrossed in the forecast. The familiar buzz against her tightly clenched hand was a jolt— Evan had arrived. Relief and a new surge of adrenaline washed over her.

“Hey, Maggie,” she said, trying to inject a playful note into her voice. “Have you checked the mail yet?”

Maggie paused, a miniature tartlet poised in her hand. “No, I haven’t. Does the mail even run today?”

Laura shrugged, the motion more exaggerated than usual. “Maybe? I could use a break. I’ll go check?”

Maggie studied her for a moment, a hint of suspicion in her eyes. “You’ve been a bit off lately. Everything alright?”

Laura’s stomach lurched, but she forced a smile, willing it to look genuine. “Absolutely! I’m just... excited about the party,” she said, her voice a touch too bright. I’ll be right back!” She fumbled with the door, unlocking it to prevent being locked out. She took a deep, steadying breath before calmly exitin.g. Only once the door clicked shut behind her did she allow herself to dash down the stairs.

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## Scene 40: "The Check is in the Mail"

Evan paced the cramped entryway by the mailboxes, the echo of Christmas music drifting down from the apartment above. A familiar tightness coiled in his chest—a mix of excitement and the first prickle of unease. The sound of hurried footsteps echoed on the stairs, and Laura burst into view, a whirlwind of nervous energy.

“What took you so long?” she hissed, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

“Sorry! Traffic was insane. I swear I left early,” Evan replied, his voice a touch higher than usual. “You wouldn’t believe the gridlock. Do you have the envelope?”

“Sure do!” Laura said, reaching under the back of her sweater, pulling the scholarship envelope from the waistband of her jeans where it was hidden. “Here, hold this.” she said, handing the envelope to Evan, freeing her hands to open the mailbox and retrieve several items of mail, mostly Christmas cards.

She divided the pieces of mail in half, signaling with her head for Evan to put the envelope in the middle. He did, and she sandwiched the letter with the rest of the mail, making it one stack.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” she breathed, clutching his hand to the top of her chest. “Is yours beating this fast?”

Evan blinked, momentarily startled when Laura impulsively grabbed his hand, placing it over her heart. A surprised laugh bubbled up as he felt the echo of her frantic pulse. “I… I think so?” he managed, his voice a touch breathless.

She pressed her hand against his chest, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “It is! I don’t think I’ve ever been this excited and scared at once!”

His voice held a newfound tremor that matched hers. “Me neither.”

“I updated the website last night,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. If she seems suspicious, show her the website, and she’ll get confirmation she is the official recipient. If we do get caught, don’t use our last-resort tactic unless we have to.”

Laura nodded, determination burning in her eyes. “Got it. Look at us—a pair of nervous wrecks!” She squeezed his hand. “Let’s get her to open that mail ASAP. One look at us, and she’ll know something’s up.”

“Good idea!” Evan forced a smile, but it felt brittle on his lips. “Are you feeling ready?”

“No,” Laura confessed, her usual confidence tinged with vulnerability. “Are you?”

“Not the slightest bit!” Evan replied.

“Well, ready or not, here we go,” Laura announced, a triumphant grin spreading across her face. “Operation Scholarship: Phase Three completed! On to the finale!”

They shared a quick, tense laugh before heading back upstairs. As Laura started to ascend, Evan gently caught her arm. She turned, a puzzled look on her face, and glimpsed the uncertainty in his eyes.

“Laura,” he began hesitantly, the words catching in his throat. “Are we sure we’re doing the right thing? This... it feels like we’re tricking Maggie.”

Laura’s expression hardened slightly, but her voice remained steady. “Is the scholarship legitimate?”

“Yes,” Evan admitted, confusion mingling with his unease.

“Did you set up a fair selection committee? Wasn’t that me?”

“Yes,” he said again, the questions starting to feel like an interrogation.

“Did you make it available to everyone who qualified?” Laura pressed on relentlessly.

Evan nodded, a reluctant affirmation.

Laura softened her tone, but her eyes remained fixed on his, unwavering in their resolve. “Look, Evan, I get why you’re conflicted. You’re a good guy. But this is what’s best for Maggie, and sometimes...” she hesitated, searching for the right words, “...sometimes a little deception is necessary for a greater good.”

“But what if we’re wrong?” Evan asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “What if we could just tell her? Maybe it would be better that way.”

Laura sighed, a hint of frustration in her voice. “Sure, if Maggie wasn’t so stubborn!” She threw her hands up in exasperation. “We both know she’d refuse it if we were upfront, no matter how much we pleaded. This way, she accepts the scholarship, and maybe, down the line, we tell her the truth.”

Evan remained silent, raking a hand through his hair in a gesture of a troubled thought. Laura’s words struck a chord, yet the guilt gnawed at him

“I just…” he started, then trailed off, unsure how to voice his lingering doubts.

Laura’s expression softened as she reached out, squeezing his hand. “I know,” she said quietly. “But I have no doubts. Zero. Nada. It’s going to change her life. Sometimes we have to break the rules for the right reasons.”

Evan’s mind flashed back to Guido’s recent advice, the words echoing in his head: “Feeling guilty isn’t doing anyone any good.”

Laura was right. And so was Guido. This was about Maggie, not about his own conscience. There was no turning back now, and besides, Maggie’s life was about to change for the better. He remembered Guido’s words: “You’re either all in or all out.” He’d been vacillating, but now it was time to be decisive

Evan straightened his shoulders, a newfound determination chasing away the last vestiges of doubt. “Then what are we waiting for?” he said, a genuine smile finally spreading across his face. “Let’s get moving. On to the finale!”

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## Scene 41: "Where’s the Postmark?"

Laura swept into the apartment, Evan right on her heels. “Look who decided to grace us with his presence!” she chirped, as she gestured towards Evan. The air crackled with a nervous energy that she desperately tried to mask.

Evan crossed to Maggie, enveloping her in a warm hug. His kiss was quick, a flicker of affection that belied the flutter of unease in his chest. As Laura placed the mail on the coffee table, her eyes met his, a silent plea for reassurance.

“Maggie’s got hors d’oeuvres to finish,” Laura interjected, forcing a smile. She busied herself rearranging a vase of poinsettias, a distraction from the tension tightening in her shoulders. “Evan, could you lend a hand moving those chairs?”

As Evan stepped forward, Laura leaned close, her whisper a barely audible hiss. “Here we go!”

“Hey, Maggie,” Laura’s voice regained its usual casual lilt. “I think you should look through the mail. I thought I saw an important-looking envelope addressed to you.”

Maggie glanced up from the cheese board she was assembling, a flicker of curiosity in her eyes. “Important?”

“Yeah, you know, official-looking,” Laura said, her eyes remained fixed on Maggie. A bead of sweat trickled down Evan’s temple, and he quickly brushed it away.

With a slight frown, Maggie approached the coffee table. A mix of resignation and curiosity crossed her face as she started to sort through the mail. “Bills, junk mail, Christmas cards... another bill.” Her voice trailed off, tinged with a hint of disappointment.

Laura and Evan stood frozen, barely breathing. Maggie’s fingers sorted through the pile of envelopes. Each rustle and shuffle seemed to echo in the sudden silence of the room.

Maggie’s voice was tinged with a mix of wonder and trepidation. “I wonder what this is about?” She tore open the envelope, her hands shaking slightly. Silence enveloped the room; only the soft rustle of the letter broke the quiet. A tiny gasp escaped her lips. Her eyes dropped to the check, and her breath hitched in her throat. Uncontrollable tears poured from her eyes, blurring the words on the page. She collapsed back onto the couch, the papers clutched in her trembling fingers.

Laura hurried to Maggie’s side, a practiced look of concern on her face. “What is it, sweetie? Is everything okay?” She knelt beside her friend, her gaze fixed on the papers in Maggie’s trembling hands. Internally, she reveled in the success of their well-crafted scheme.

“This can’t be real,” Maggie choked out. “It says I’ve been awarded a scholarship, and there’s a cashier’s check with my name on it for $15,000.” Her words tumbled out in a rush of disbelief.

Laura affected an air of surprise, her eyes widening theatrically. “Let me see that!” Snatching the documents, she scanned them quickly. “This is that scholarship I told you about the other day. I had a good feeling about that!”

Maggie’s tears dried as confusion warred with a hint of hope. “How could they pick someone so quickly?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“I told you, it was a Christmas scholarship. It was for an Irish-American culinary student. I think we got lucky and timed it perfectly,” Laura said, her tone bordering on overly enthusiastic.

Maggie’s expression tightened, suspicion dawning within her. “This must be a scam or something. Things like this never happen to me.” She turned to Evan, her eyes pleading. “Evan, come here and look at this.”

Laura sprang to her feet, a forced excitement ringing in her voice. “Hold on! I think we can clear this right up.” Before Maggie or Evan could even respond, she dashed off, adding a touch of urgency to the pretense.

Evan watched her go, a knot of tension in his stomach. He’d prepared Laura for this, carefully coaching her to suggest the website as “proof”. He took the letter and cashier’s check, scrutinizing them with a serious, analytical expression. He needed to appear earnestly engaged, stalling to buy her more time.

Evan cleared his throat, trying to sound confident. “I am not an expert on these things, Maggie. I certainly never received a scholarship. However, I have seen my fair share of cashier’s checks, and this one looks kosher to me.”

Maggie’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “So, you’re telling me I can waltz into the bank tomorrow and magically become fifteen thousand dollars richer? Just like that?” A sarcastic edge laced her words, exposing the absurdity of the situation as she saw it.

A touch of unease crossed Evan’s face, but he quickly masked it. “Well, not tomorrow because the banks are closed on Christmas. But as soon as the banks open…yes!”

Laura beamed, unable to contain her excitement any longer. “Look, Maggie. It even shows on their website. You are the official recipient of the ‘McCarthy Irish-American Culinary Scholarship.’”

A tremor ran through Maggie’s hand as she took the check again. The name of the scholarship nagged at her, an itch she couldn’t quite scratch. “I’ve never heard of anything like an Irish-American Culinary Scholarship.”

“See, it’s right here,” Laura insisted, thrusting her laptop towards Maggie. Her voice held a forced cheerfulness that grated on Maggie’s increasingly raw nerves.

Maggie scrolled through the website, her eyes scanning the text. A combination of confusion and suspicion crept into her voice. “But how did you even find this scholarship, Laura? I can’t find anything about it on the Internet.” She looked up at Evan, suspicion hardening her gaze. “Wait a minute. Evan, hand me that envelope.”

Evan passed the scholarship envelope to Maggie. A flicker of apprehension crossed her face as she took it. She compared it to the pile of bills and Christmas cards, her eyes narrowing in concentration. A shiver ran down her spine as a sense of unease settled over her. Then she saw it—a seemingly insignificant detail that could unravel their entire plan. Its presence—or rather, its absence—was as glaring as a neon sign. This fatal flaw was the smoking gun, a piece of evidence that could expose their deception. But would Maggie connect the dots? Would she realize the truth hidden in plain sight?

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## Scene 42: "Resistance vs. Persistence"

A jolt of realization shot through Maggie. “Why is there no postmark on this envelope?” The room seemed to spin around her as she tried to process this impossible discovery. Laura’s breath hitched, and her hand fluttered nervously at her throat. Evan’s eyes darted between Maggie and the envelope, his jaw tightening. A mix of resignation and a surprising sense of relief battled within him—the secret was about to be out in the open.

Evan and Laura’s gazes met for a fleeting moment. A silent understanding passed between them. Laura’s eyes widened with a hint of panic, a silent apology forming on her lips. Evan, however, surprised himself with a sudden lightness and relief. The burden of keeping this secret was about to be lifted.

Laura, hoping Maggie would focus on the stamp that she remembered and not the postmark that she forgot, blurted out, “It’s got a stamp!” Her voice held a forced cheerfulness.

Maggie narrowed her eyes, unconvinced. “But it should have a postmark, like all these other envelopes.” A look of suspicion sparked in her eyes, replacing any hint of amusement.

Evan offered a wry smile, conceding the slip-up. “Damn postmark,” he quipped, a sense of relief evident as the pretense unraveled.

Maggie finally pieced it together. Her eyes widened with a mix of disbelief and a hint of hurt. “Evan, what did you do? Please tell me this isn’t from you.” Her voice trembled slightly.

Evan, hoping to salvage a shred of anonymity, responded with a shrug. “The letter said the benefactor of the scholarship wishes to remain anonymous. I think we should honor that.”

Maggie saw through his weak attempt at misdirection. This only confirmed her suspicions. “Evan, you know there’s no way I can accept this.” She shook her head, her gaze unwavering.

“Why not?” Laura interjected, a pleading note in her voice.

Maggie turned towards Evan, the hurt in her eyes intensifying. “How did you know the exact amount I needed to finish school? I never told you I was having problems paying tuition.”

A guilty flush spread across Laura’s face, but a hint of playfulness remained in her expression. “Oh no. Please don’t tell me you’re involved in this too?” Maggie’s voice held a mix of disbelief and accusation.

Laura tucked in her elbows playfully, then spread her hands wide in a comical gesture of surrender. “Meet the selection committee!” she declared, a wry smile playing on her lips.

Maggie stared at them, a mix of disbelief and dawning anger tightening her features. “I can’t believe this is happening. Is this why the two of you have been acting so strange lately?” Her voice shook slightly, a tremor of betrayal echoing within it.

Laura’s expression softened, her eyes filled with genuine concern. “We just want to help you, Maggie.”

Maggie recoiled as if struck. “I told you before, Laura, I’m not a charity case!” Her defensiveness masked a deep-seated insecurity.

Laura’s voice took on a pleading tone. “I didn’t say you were. But I don’t see anything wrong with accepting help from the people who love you. You work so hard and never catch a break. You deserve this! Please accept the scholarship.”

Maggie buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she repeated, her voice muffled. “You two had no right to go behind my back and set this whole thing up.”

Concern etched itself onto Evan’s face. “Don’t let your pride sabotage your success, Maggie,” he said softly.

Maggie’s head snapped up, her eyes blazing. “Evan, please don’t psychoanalyze me!” She spat out the words, misinterpreting his genuine concern. “We are not talking about fifty dollars here, or even five hundred. This is fifteen thousand!”

Laura, sensing an opening, pressed her point. “That may be a lot of money to you and me, but Evan makes that much in just a week or two. He gets that whether he works or not.”

Evan nodded, “That’s true. That money was just sitting in my bank doing no one any good.”

Maggie’s jaw dropped. She had no idea Evan was so wealthy. “You really make that much?” she asked, her voice laced with shock.

Evan nodded again, a slight shrug hinting at his discomfort with the conversation.

Laura, building on their momentum, continued, “And he doesn’t have any mortgage or car payments. His monthly expenses are less than ours. So, there’s no reason for you not to accept this gift.”

Maggie’s frustration mingled with a hint of resignation. “What are you, his accountant?” Her sarcasm was tinged with a touch of humor. She let out a long breath, a mix between a sigh and a weary grunt.

Evan’s voice held a gentle sincerity. “We just wanted to help you finish something so important to you, Maggie.”

Maggie’s gratitude warred with her stubborn pride. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer and the effort from you both,” she began, her voice softening, “but I simply can’t accept such a large amount of money. So, thank you, Evan, and thank you, Laura. But I am rejecting the scholarship. I want you to have your money back.”

Evan’s matter-of-fact statement cut through Maggie’s resolve. “You can reject the scholarship if you want, but that money won’t come back to me. This scholarship is 100% legal and legitimate. If you don’t accept it, the money will have to go to another Irish-American culinary student.”

Maggie’s eyes widened in shock. “You’re kidding me!?” A sense of being cornered crept into her voice.

“No, he’s not kidding,” Laura interjected, her voice laced with urgency and a hint of desperation. “That money must go to a culinary student. Since I’m the sole member of the selection committee, I’ll have to pick someone else to receive the scholarship. Maggie, please don’t make me give that money to someone else.”

The absurdity of the situation washed over Maggie. “This is crazy!” She stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor, and retreated to the kitchen, seeking a moment of respite from the relentless pressure.

Laura exchanged a worried glance with Evan. She motioned towards Maggie with a tilt of her head, an unspoken plea for him to comfort her. Evan rose and followed Maggie into the kitchen. He wrapped his arms around her, offering silent support as she finally gave in to the tears she had been desperately holding back. After several minutes, Maggie gently pushed him away, her eyes red and swollen.

“I don’t know how to be okay with this,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

Laura and Evan exchanged another knowing look. Laura couldn’t suppress a thrill of excitement. It was time to deploy their last-resort tactic—the one they had hoped they wouldn’t have to use, but prepared for nonetheless. Her heart raced; she was filled with hope and anticipation, eager to see if their strategy would work its magic on Maggie.

Laura approached Maggie, her voice filled with carefully crafted persuasion. “I think you’re looking at this all wrong, Maggie. If the situation were reversed and Evan needed money to finish school, wouldn’t you give it to him? Wouldn’t you gladly sacrifice two weeks of income to make such an important impact on his life?”

Maggie hesitated, her features twisted in contemplation. “Of course, I would. You know I would. But it’s $15,000, Laura!”

Laura pressed on, her voice unwavering. “Stop thinking of it like that. It’s one or two weeks of income that Evan would earn even if he spent his days on the beach. There is absolutely no reason for you not to accept this from him. And if everything were reversed, you’d insist he accept the money from you. Am I right or not?”

Evan moved closer to Maggie, his touch light on her chin as he tilted her face up to meet his gaze. “Please accept the scholarship,” he murmured, his voice soft and tender. “I want you to have it, and you deserve it.”

Maggie hesitated, her emotions a tangled web of surprise and conflict. She sought a moment to breathe, to untangle the sudden influx of revelations. Evan and Laura exchanged a look of quiet solidarity, their shared hope for Maggie’s acceptance of the scholarship hanging delicately in the balance. It was a silent pact of support, their optimistic anticipation mingled with uncertainty. The ball was in Maggie’s court now, leaving them in suspense, eager yet apprehensive about her next move.

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## Scene 43: "Pay it Forward"

Maggie’s mind was a whirlwind—gratitude battling pride, temptation warring with her deeply ingrained sense of independence. The weight of the decision pressed down on her. Should she accept this generous, life-altering gift, an act of love from the people who cared for her most? Or should she hold fast to her fiercely independent spirit, determined to achieve her goals solely through her own grit and determination? A sliver of a compromise began to form—perhaps there was a middle ground.

“All right, I’ll accept the scholarship,” Maggie said, her voice tinged with a mix of resignation and gratitude.

Laura squealed in excitement, leaping to her feet before enveloping Evan and Maggie in a joyful hug. The three friends embraced, clinging to one another. After several minutes, the hug loosened, and a sense of calm settled over them.

Maggie pulled back, a determined glint in her eyes. “But this isn’t a gift,” she insisted. “I want this to be considered a loan. After I graduate and start earning a decent salary, I’ll pay it back, with interest. Don’t even think about arguing with me.”

Evan, anticipating this response, smiled gently. “If paying me back makes you feel better, then you can. But may I suggest an alternative? Why don’t you pay it forward?”

The term “pay it forward” stirred a glimmer of interest in Maggie’s eyes. She subtly adjusted her position, showing a hint of curiosity about the notion. “Pay it forward?”

“Yes,” Evan explained. “I don’t need the money, and I’d rather see it go to another deserving student. Instead of paying me back, why don’t you start your own culinary scholarship? It can be any amount—even $500 or $1000 a year. If you do that, think of how many other students you could help.”

Laura, always in sync with Evan, chimed in with enthusiasm. “I love that idea! Why pay back someone who doesn’t need the money? Think about the positive impact you could have on a struggling student.”

A sense of relief washed over Maggie. Evan’s suggestion struck a chord with her—it was a way to accept the generous gift while staying true to her caring nature and to independent spirit. “That would feel like a fortune to most students. I really like that idea,” Maggie admitted. “Thank you so much! I love you both!”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Maggie pulled her friends into another tight hug. As they embraced, a flicker of realization ignited in her mind—a memory of Evan’s earlier deception about the car repairs.

Maggie abruptly pulled back from the hug, suspicion sparking in her eyes. “Hold on. Why do I suddenly suspect my car repairs cost a lot more than $500?”

A mischievous smile spread across Evan’s face, and Laura couldn’t suppress a grin. In perfect unison, they zipped their lips, their playful silence confirming Maggie’s suspicion.

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## Scene 44: "Evan Questions His Motives"

The Christmas Eve party buzzed with merriment, laughter, and music spilling out into the hallway. Evan lingered by the closed door, sharing a warm goodbye with Maggie. His forced smile faltered, a flicker of unease clouding his features. Regret tugged at him; Maggie had invited him to stay the night, and he respectfully declined under the guise of spending Christmas morning with his mother and Liz. The excuse held a grain of truth, but guilt settled over him like an unwelcome guest. He pushed the unsettling feelings aside for now, focusing on the moment.

“It’s been a wonderful night, Maggie,” Evan said, his eyes meeting hers. “I wish I could stay.”

Maggie’s face fell slightly. “I know,” she replied, a trace of disappointment in her tone. “It’s okay. Christmas is family time.”

They shared a lingering kiss, a familiar warmth mingling with a bittersweet undercurrent. Evan broke away, guilt gnawing at him again. He waved goodbye, hurrying down the hallway towards the elevator, the cheerful facade he’d worn throughout the party beginning to crumble.

The drive home was silent save for the soft hum of the car engine. The festive cheer of Maggie’s party gave way to an oppressive quiet, mirroring Evan’s internal turmoil. Images of the evening flashed through his mind: Maggie’s radiant smile, her newfound lightness as she reveled in the unexpected relief from her financial burdens. A pang of satisfaction warmed him, followed by a wave of unease.

Was it merely the circumstances of our relationship plan driving my scholarship gift? If we weren’t bound by this unusual situation, would I still be so inclined to ease her burdens? Would the same sense of obligation even exist? The answer remained frustratingly elusive.

A makeshift courtroom materialized within his mind. Evan, stern-faced and weary, found himself perched on the elevated bench of the judge. Before him, split into two distinct personas, was himself.

Defense Attorney Evan rose first, his once hesitant voice now booming with conviction. “Your Honor,” he addressed the jury (himself), “the evidence is irrefutable. Exhibit A: Maggie, on the verge of abandoning her culinary career due to financial hardship. Exhibit B: Maggie, post-scholarship, able to not only stay in school but thrive. My client’s actions were not only justified but undeniably noble!” Laura and Guido’s voices echoed in support from the gallery, their words amplifying the defense’s argument.

Then, it was the prosecution’s turn. “Noble!” the prosecutor scoffed. “Is the defense serious? Such blatant hypocrisy! Your Honor, the defense attempts to paint a picture of nobility. But nobility is rooted in honesty, and there is nothing noble about lies and deception. We are not discussing a harmless surprise party, but the foundation of a relationship built on a false pretense. The defendant intentionally misled the woman he supposedly cares for. His misguided generosity cannot nullify the harm of his actions.” A whisper from Liz bolstered the prosecution’s point: “All lies, big or small, erode trust, Evan.”

The internal courtroom pulsed with tension. The jury (Evan, the impartial observer within himself) struggled to reach a verdict. The defense pointed to Maggie’s radiant smile, her newfound hope. The prosecution countered, focusing on the inevitable day when their unusual relationship must end—a day that promised heartbreak. As the arguments raged on, no clear verdict emerged. The jury was deadlocked.

Exhaustion washed over him. Evan, as judge, called for a recess, the internal courtroom dissolving. Yet, the battle continued to linger within him, leaving behind only the bitter taste of guilt and the unsettling weight of an unresolved moral dilemma.

That night, nestled in the familiar comfort of his own bed, Evan knew the true reason he hadn’t stayed over at Maggie’s was a guilt too heavy to ignore.

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## Scene 44 Alt: "Evan Questions His Motives: Alt Version"

The Christmas Eve party buzzed with merriment, laughter, and music spilling out into the hallway. Evan lingered by the closed door, sharing a warm goodbye with Maggie. His forced smile faltered, a flicker of unease clouding his features. Regret tugged at him; Maggie had invited him to stay the night, and he respectfully declined under the guise of spending Christmas morning with his mother and Liz. The excuse held a grain of truth, but guilt settled over him like an unwelcome guest. He pushed the unsettling feelings aside for now, focusing on the moment.

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Was it merely the circumstances of our relationship plan driving my scholarship gift? If we weren’t bound by this unusual situation, would I still be so inclined to ease her burdens? Would the same sense of obligation even exist? The answer remained frustratingly elusive.

A cacophony of voices rose in his mind. Guido's echoes rang loud: "The end justifies the means, Ev. She gets to stay in school!" In sharp contrast, Liz's gentle wisdom whispered, "Remember, Evan, even small falsehoods build into towering deceptions. Honesty is always the best policy." An ache settled in Evan's chest. His usual reliance on Liz's pragmatism wavered. He couldn't deny the positive change the scholarship had brought into Maggie's life. Yet, the deception gnawed at him, leaving an unsettling taste of guilt.

That night, nestled in the familiar comfort of his own bed, Evan knew the true reason he hadn’t stayed over at Maggie’s was a guilt too heavy to ignore.