# Chapter - The Divorce

Why?

Saturday, September 21

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 start, 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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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, deepening the chasm of his loss. 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’s attention returned to Sarah, his throat tightened, a tumult 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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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-grey 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 Evans’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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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 ensure through every contact I and my father have that this firm doesn’t see a dime from anyone we know. 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 chasm 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 palpable. “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 senior 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 senior 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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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... seeing 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 flicker of curiosity lighting her eyes.

“The Vaughn Foundation, Sarah. Your push toward nonprofit work sparked Evan’s passion. Think of the impact you’ve both made,” Liz reminded her, emphasizing the positive ripple effects of their union.

“Evan played his part too. He’s an excellent project manager and team leader, better with clients than I’ll ever be,” Sarah conceded, acknowledging Evan’s strengths.

“True, but the operational side of things? That’s 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. 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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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 back 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 flickered to Sarah’s hand, the absence of her wedding ring sending a stab of pain through him, a silent testament to the chasm 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 90% fun and games and 10% 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 soft plea cut through the tension. “I’ll stop if you can 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.

# Chapter - The Love, Annually Plan is Created

Evan is Ready to Share his Plan

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 sporty black interior of the car stood ready for any adventure, while the dark blue and white exterior mirrored the merging of city and wilderness in Evan’s life.

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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Poker Host Liz Breaks For Chloe

Liz, the epitome of warmth and welcome, lit up the room with her radiant smile, perfectly embodying the spirit of hospitality that filled her cozy Glenview home. With a stature that was neither tall nor short, complemented by a physique that struck a balance between fitness and comfort, her medium-length brown hair cascaded gracefully past her shoulders, adding to her approachable demeanor. While she could effortlessly glam up for gala events, Liz opted for her go-to relaxed attire that night—a pair of comfy blue jeans paired with a soft sweatshirt—prioritizing comfort and a laid-back vibe for her gathering.

In an open kitchen ideally designed for entertaining guests, Liz busied herself with the evening’s preparations, her heart light with the anticipation of hosting another memorable poker night. The kitchen, a hub of activity, saw Liz expertly navigating between the oven and the beautifully set table, ensuring everything was perfect for the arrival of her cherished friends and family. The savory aroma of snacks filled the air, blending seamlessly with the homely ambiance of her modest, well-kept house.

Amid the bustling preparations, Liz’s phone illuminated with an incoming call, the screen displaying “Chloe Collette.” A mix of concern and affection washed over Liz at the sight. Chloe’s calls always mean something’s up, Liz thought, her mind racing with the possibilities—boyfriend troubles, family dramas, the usual chaos that seemed to follow her vibrant friend from St. Louis. Yet, the sight of Chloe’s name always brought a smile to Liz’s face, reminding her of the deep bond they shared, one that had evolved from mentorship to a profound friendship.

Quickly adjusting her surroundings to give Chloe her full attention, Liz turned down the lively music and turned off the stove burner, preventing the cheese dip from burning. She poured herself a glass of wine, settling onto a stool by the island, and answered the call on speakerphone, the house momentarily silent in anticipation of Chloe’s voice. Liz could hear Chloe crying hysterically.

“Chloe, honey, take a deep breath and tell me what’s wrong,” Liz said soothingly, her voice a calm beacon in the storm of Chloe’s distress.

Chloe’s response came between sobs, “My boyfriend dumped me!”

Liz’s heart sank, a blend of frustration and compassion stirring within her. “Again? What did he say this time?” she inquired, her tone carrying a hint of displeasure towards the recurring antagonist in Chloe’s stories.

Chloe’s tears flowed as she recounted another trivial argument gone awry, “We had another stupid fight about nothing! He called me a bitch and told me he never wants to see me again!”

Liz listened, her spirit undeterred by the all-too-familiar cycle, her advice ready. “He doesn’t treat you very well, Chloe. Maybe it’s best this way. I don’t understand why you always go back to him.”

Chloe, defensive and childlike, “Because he loves me, and I love him!”

Liz sighed, the weight of her nurturing role never heavier. “Really? Do you really love him, Chloe? Do you really think he loves you the way he treats you?” she challenged gently, hoping to ignite a spark of realization in Chloe.

Chloe’s resistance waned, her sniffling a soft background to her uncertainty. “I don’t know, Liz, but I don’t want to be alone.”

“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,” Liz implored, her words a blend of compassion and stern advice.

The conversation took a sudden turn as Chloe’s attention shifted, excitement replacing despair. “Oh, Liz, let me call you back tomorrow. He’s calling me right now, and I need to answer before he hangs up.” The call came to a sudden halt. Liz wasn’t put off by Chloe’s rapid departure from the conversation. For reasons she couldn’t quite pinpoint, Liz saw a certain charm in Chloe’s swift shift from tearful despair to budding hope concerning her boyfriend.

As Liz resumed her hosting duties, the sound of the front door opening hinted at the arrival of the night’s first guest.

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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 exclaimed, his voice bubbling with enthusiasm.

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 kill 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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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 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, Joe joined the group, his larger-than-life personality a stark contrast to the quiet dignity of the Robinsons.

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.

Guido’s voice, a rich blend of Joey Tribbiani’s charm and Andrew Dice Clay’s edge, carried a streetwise authenticity. To some, Guido’s demeanor bordered on arrogance, a trait he wore as a badge of honor, considering it an acknowledgment of his unapologetic approach to life. Yet, beneath the surface, Liz saw a different Guido. To Liz, he was like a mischievous younger brother, his brashness a façade masking a depth and loyalty seen by few.

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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Evan Reveals Love, Annually Plan

As everyone settled into their seats, Evan stood apart, a mix of nerves and excitement palpable in his stance. He launched into his announcement with a mischievous grin, “Before we start lightening Guido’s pockets, I had an epiphany after yet another uninspiring date. I have a breakthrough idea I can’t wait to share with all of you!”

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!”

The room was alive with light-hearted ribbing, but as the laughter died down, all eyes turned back to Evan, curious with what he had to say. Joe, ever impatient for the poker to commence, was the sole exception. Evan, knowing the power of engagement, chose to preface his reveal with an interactive approach, sidestepping a monologue for a more captivating entry into his proposal.

Evan posed a thought-provoking question to the group, “What’s the major pitfall in long-term relationships?”

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’s 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 leaned 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 Joe and me. 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 brilliant idea?”

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 involved appealing women. 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 groundbreaking 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, far exceeding simple surprise or disbelief.

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 that I am 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 perfect 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? 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 rare 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 posited 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 flicker 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, wordless, simply turned and retreated to another room, leaving Evan hanging in a suspenseful silence, wondering if his plea had reached her heart or if he’d pushed too far.

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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 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: 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, “you can’t break it off or push her away, unless, you know, she presents some sort of danger. We’re doing this 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 children, 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 children. If you entered a relationship with a woman who had children, I worry you would stay with her even if you didn’t love her, just to protect the children 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, a testament to the gravity Evan’s plan held for him. “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. I think there should be a time limit, so you don’t drag the girl along indefinitely. Rule #7 should be if you’re not ready to commit to your year together after four weeks of dating, 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 gotta think about how tough this is gonna be for her. If you’re relationship is going great and then suddenly it’s over, that’s gonna 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. “Your 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 start the poker game without me. I’ve got a bit of work to finish up here.”

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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.