# Chapter - The Divorce

Why?

Timeline: 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

So there Evan was, smack in the middle of downtown Chicago, holed up in Sarah’s fancy lawyer’s office. The vibe was super quiet, which was weird considering how wild the weather was getting outside. You could see the gloomy clouds through the big window, kind of matching Evan’s mood because, yeah, he was dealing with his marriage ending. Everything in that room felt heavy, like the end of an era kind of heavy.

Evan kept flipping his gaze from the storm outside to those dreaded divorce papers on the table, and he couldn’t shake off this memory from when he was ten. Back then, his own parents were splitting up, and he made this big promise to himself that he’d never end up in that situation. But, life has a funny way of laughing at your plans, right? Here he was, doing exactly what he swore he wouldn’t. Breaking that promise felt like he was letting his younger self down big time. And losing Sarah? That was like a punch to the gut, but breaking his own childhood vow was the real kicker.

Evan’s a tall guy, athletic, with these hazel eyes that usually have this warm, inviting vibe. People are drawn to him not just because he looks good but because he’s got this big heart and always lends a hand when you need it. But there, in that office, his usual charm was nowhere in sight. He watched Sarah’s expensive lawyers swarm around his own, arguing over stuff that didn’t even matter anymore. Evan and Sarah had already figured out the big things; this was just a show for the lawyers to earn their keep, which was pretty annoying to watch.

Then there was Liz, busy with paperwork, probably sorting out the mess Sarah’s departure would make in their business. Evan couldn’t help but feel this mix of thankfulness and sadness looking at her. Liz was always there, picking up the pieces, and it just made him appreciate her even more, you know?

But when Evan looked at Sarah, it was like a ton of bricks hit him. She looked so different, relaxed even, and it just screamed that their time together was done. Her hair wasn’t all tight and business-like; it was free, reminding him of the spark they had when they first met. It was like seeing a ghost of what could have been, making it hard for him to keep it together.

He kept hoping Sarah would look at him, give him some kind of sign that what they had meant something. But she was lost in her own world, staring out that window, leaving Evan feeling even more alone. The silence was brutal, full of all the things they never said, all the answers he’d never get. It was like standing in the middle of a storm of his own feelings, with no idea how to find his way out.

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Crossroads of the Heart

There Sarah was, just gazing out at Lake Michigan, all caught up in the drama of the waves that pretty much mirrored the chaos going on inside her. She kept playing with this simple pendant Evan made for her, which was a far cry from the fancy stuff she usually wore. It got her thinking, why was she so hung up on this piece? It wasn’t about the cost; it was something more, something that made her heart do somersaults every time she touched it.

The pendant, just a quirky piece made from a doll’s glasses, always took her back to their first date, to that rush of feelings she had never expected. That night, when Evan showed her the pendant and shared its story, it was the first time Sarah felt something real, something that made her eyes water with genuine emotion. And even now, just remembering that feeling punched through her usual cool exterior, bringing back a wave of nostalgia for the magic they once had.

Switching up her look from her battle-ready business attire, Sarah wore something more chill. Sarah’s hair usually all neat and professional, was now loose and wavy like she was trying to raise a white flag rather than gear up for a fight.

Sitting there, Sarah was wrestling with a ton of regret. She kept wondering if she should’ve just said no when Evan proposed, maybe sparing them both this heartache. It wasn’t just about the pain they were going through; it was also about how far she had strayed from her own plans for her life. The thought made her breath catch, the air heavy with the sorrow of what ifs.

The idea of catching Evan’s eye was downright terrifying for Sarah. He was always this beacon of positivity, and she couldn’t stand the thought of seeing that light dimmed by hurt or resentment. That fear had pushed her to leave a note instead of saying goodbye in person. She knew Evan well, his kindness, his hopefulness, and how he’d rather find solace in solitude than spill his sadness everywhere. And yet, she couldn’t shake off the fear of what it would mean to really look him in the eye, to confront the depth of their issues face to face.

When Sarah saw Liz giving Evan a gentle nudge to check the documents, it was like a tiny bit of relief in the middle of all this mess. Liz’s understanding smile was a small comfort, a sign that someone understood the tough choice Sarah had made, even if it wasn’t the way Evan or anyone else would’ve handled it. Sarah clung to the hope that Liz’s insight would somehow make Evan see why things had to end this way.

Watching Evan go over the paperwork without her hit Sarah unexpectedly hard. She had always kind of seen him as this naive guy who needed her to navigate the boring parts of life. But seeing him there, trying to handle it on his own, stirred up a weird mix of guilt and concern. She couldn’t help but wonder, How’s he going to manage without me? Despite the turmoil inside her, knowing Liz would be there to guide Evan offered a sliver of comfort, a tiny beacon of hope in the storm that was swirling around Sarah’s heart.

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Evan Demands Answers

Evan was sitting there, trying to make heads or tails of the sales agreement for Sarah’s share of the company. Honestly, it might as well have been written in Martian. He leaned back, pretty much throwing his hands up and trusting his lawyer to make sense of it all, since the divorce papers had already confused him enough.

The room went all quiet when Sarah’s main lawyer got up, basically putting everyone on pause. He was like, “Alright, we’re good to go with the divorce papers,” mentioning some last-minute tweaks Evan’s lawyer had thrown in. They were at the big moment where Sarah’s part of the company was going to Liz, and you could feel the tension.

They started passing around the paperwork, and Evan couldn’t help but watch Sarah scribbling her signature super fast. It was like she couldn’t wait to get out of there, and that really got under Evan’s skin.

He couldn’t keep it in anymore and let out, “Wow, you really are anxious to get divorced. I’ve never seen you sign anything so fast.”

Sarah, not even stopping her signing spree, shot back, “I’ve already read the documents and agreed to the changes your attorney made.”

But Evan was digging his heels in, “I’m not signing anything until I get some answers.”

Sarah tried to soften her approach, “Come on, Evan, don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

Evan, though, wasn’t budging, “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 sounded like she was running out of patience, “Evan, I told you it wasn’t working anymore.”

Evan, getting more heated, pushed back, “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 jumped in, siding with Evan, “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.”

Then, out of nowhere, one of the younger lawyers lost it and lashed out at Liz, “You ungrateful bitch! Sarah’s practically giving you the company.”

Sarah froze him with her reply, “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 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.”

Evan’s lawyer tried to smooth things over, pointing out, “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 accommodating in ways I have never experienced in these types of settlements. I recommend you sign these documents.”

Evan wasn’t having any of it, “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, seeing no way out, caved, “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.”

She then checked with her senior lawyer if they could chat privately post-meeting, and he was all apologetic about the drama, giving them the green light to use the room.

Sarah turned to Evan, her voice gentler, “Thank you. Will that work for you, Evan?”

In the silence that followed, Evan’s nod to Liz was like saying, “It’s okay, go ahead and sign.” He then signed off on the divorce and the sales agreement himself, sealing the deal without a word. This moment was heavy, wrapping up one chapter of their lives and setting the stage for some tough talks ahead.

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Understanding and Goodbyes

Once the dust had settled on the divorce paperwork and the lawyers had wrapped up with polite nods, Sarah and Liz were left in the quiet aftermath, just the two of them amid a sea of unsaid things.

Sarah broke the silence, her voice carrying a hint of worry. “You don’t hate me, do you?”

Liz looked at her, all softness. “Why would I hate you, Sarah?”

Sarah sighed, the burden of her choices heavy on her. “It’s just... with how tight you and Evan are, and him being this upset...” She couldn’t finish the thought, the guilt too much to bear.

“I never wanted to hurt him. You get that, right?” Sarah looked for some sign of understanding in Liz’s eyes.

Liz’s reply was gentle, yet firm. “Yes, I get it, and no, I don’t hate you.”

A wave of relief passed through Sarah. “I’m guessing I’m not exactly popular at the office right now. They probably think I’m a monster.”

Liz gave her a bit of insight. “Evan’s trying to stay strong, but everyone can see he’s hurting. It’s natural for them to pick sides.”

Sarah felt defensive. “They never really took to me, even before all this.”

Liz countered softly, “They just haven’t gotten to know you as well as I have. If they did, they’d feel differently.”

Sarah’s gaze fell, lost in thought. “I regret the pain I’ve caused Evan. Part of me wonders if saying no to his proposal would’ve been kinder in the long run.” She paused, haunted by the what-ifs.

Liz tried to steer her toward the positives. “You can’t get stuck in the past, Sarah. Remember the good things that came out of your marriage.”

“Good?” Sarah looked up, a spark of curiosity in her eyes.

“The Vaughn Foundation, Sarah. Your drive for nonprofit work ignited Evan’s passion. The difference you’ve made together is undeniable,” Liz pointed out, highlighting their achievements.

Sarah admitted, “Evan has his strengths, no doubt. He’s got a knack for managing projects and teams, something I could never match.”

Liz agreed, “Sure, but when it came to the day-to-day operations, you were unbeatable. He might miss your know-how, but he’ll get by.”

Sarah’s concern was clear. “I’m worried about him, though. He’s clueless about the basics, like taxes or writing a check. Despite being good with numbers, managing money just isn’t his thing. I’m scared he might end up in trouble.”

“Don’t fret. Evan’s not one to splurge, and I’m already helping him brush up on the essentials. He’ll pick up what he needs,” Liz assured her.

Sarah was earnest. “Thank you, Liz. Just promise me you’ll let me know if there’s anything you need. I can’t help but worry about him.”

Liz smiled. “Trust me, I’ve had Evan’s back since we were kids. That’s not going to change now.”

Sarah looked at Liz, her admiration clear. “If I could choose anyone to be like, it’d be you. You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

Liz was touched by her words. “That means a lot, Sarah. And you know, I think you’re pretty amazing yourself.”

Their conversation ended with a hug, a simple act that spoke volumes of their respect and shared history, giving them a moment of peace amid the chaos.

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The Last Kiss

Evan returned to the conference room, the tension from his quick chat outside clinging to him like a second skin. The vibe instantly shifted as he caught Liz and Sarah pulling away from a hug that seemed to say a whole lot without any words at all. Liz, catching the vibe off Evan, gave his shoulder a quick, supportive touch before slipping out, the door closing softly behind her.

Sarah, meanwhile, sank back into her chair like she was gearing up for a storm. Evan dropped into the chair across from her, and man, you could’ve cut the silence with a knife. It was just them, staring each other down, with Evan’s look throwing silent daggers. But Sarah? She kept her cool, her face calm, though you gotta wonder what kind of storm was brewing inside.

“What do you want to know, Evan?” Sarah finally broke the ice, her tone straightforward. It was clear she was ready for whatever Evan was about to throw at her.

Evan’s eyes darted to Sarah’s bare ring finger, and it was like you could see the hurt flash across his face. “I want to know everything,” he let out, his voice a mix of annoyance and hurt. “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, trying to bridge the Grand Canyon-sized gap between them. “Things weren’t fine. We are on different paths. We have different goals. Can’t you see that?” Her attempt was calm, aiming to get Evan to see her side of things.

But Evan wasn’t having any of it. He dug in. “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 shot back, not ready to let go of the life they had.

“Why do you think we thrived in the bedroom and business?” Sarah threw the question back at him, trying to nudge him toward a deeper realization.

Evan, with a hint of sarcasm that didn’t quite hide his reluctance to face the music, answered, “I don’t know. Because we love each other and do good work?”

Sarah sighed, the weight of their unresolved issues heavy in her voice. “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.”

“What problems?” Evan asked, his confusion genuine. It was like he was hearing this for the first time.

“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 laid it out for him, her words sketching the slow fade of their connection.

Evan, looking a bit lost and more than a bit desperate. “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.” His voice carried a mix of confusion and a plea for understanding, like he was trying to solve a puzzle without all the pieces.

Sarah, keeping her cool but with a touch of sadness sneaking into her eyes, hit him with a truth bomb. “I wanted a child, not a big family. And you wouldn’t be the right kind of father.” Her words were gentle, not wanting to hurt him but needing to be honest.

Evan, taken aback, winced as if her words were a physical blow. “Why would you say that? You know I love working with kids.” His voice cracked a little, showing just how much her assessment stung.

Sarah let out a sigh, her tone soft but filled with a firm conviction. “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.”

Diving deeper into her past, she continued, her voice growing stronger with each word. “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 through books and tutors. I like how I was raised, and I plan to raise my child in the same way.” It was clear she respected her upbringing and wanted to carry forward those values.

Evan, trying to keep up, furrowed his brow, hanging on her every word. Sarah didn’t let up, driving her point home. “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.” It was like she was trying to show him a mirror, reflecting their fundamental differences.

Switching gears, she tackled another big issue between them. “Yes I want to travel, but mostly for business, not leisure. It’s been my dream since high school to grow a company internationally, and that’s just not what you want,” she concluded, her tone laced with a resolve that seemed to have been building up over time.

Evan’s face softened a bit, showing a glimpse of understanding amidst the confusion. “And you don’t think we can find a compromise?” His said, clinging to the idea of finding some common ground.

Sarah locked eyes with him, her gaze filled with a complex mix 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.” There was a weight to her words, acknowledging the good times even as she recognized their journey had diverged.

Taking a deep breath, she laid it all out. “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.” Her voice was steady, but you could hear the underlying need for change, for something that was truly hers.

Evan, looking more lost than ever, finally managed to find his words. “I hear your words, but doubt I’ll ever understand your decision. 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.” His tone was a mix of bewilderment and a hint of accusation, like he was still trying to piece together a puzzle that didn’t quite fit.

Sarah looked away briefly, gathering her thoughts, then met his gaze again with a vulnerability that was hard to miss. “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.” Her whisper carried a heavy truth, a confession of how deeply they were connected and yet, paradoxically, how necessary it was for her to step away.

Evan, looking perplexed, let his emotions spill. “I don’t understand why you had to go back to your maiden name so quickly,” his words were heavy, filled with confusion and hurt, “or why you stopped wearing your wedding ring before the divorce was finalized.” He showed his own ring, still snug on his finger, like a silent plea. “I still have mine on! Are you already in the market looking to replace me?” The question hung in the air, heavy and fraught with implication.

Sarah, sitting there with the weight of the world on her shoulders, couldn’t even lift her eyes to meet his. Her silence filled the room, echoing louder than any words could. Evan’s heart plummeted, feeling like he’d been socked in the gut as he covered his face, trying to hide from the wave of sadness washing over him.

She walked around the table, squatted down to a seated Evan, and gently turned his chair so he’d face her. “Evan,” she started, her voice soft and filled with a kind of warmth that made it even harder to hear, “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.” Her honesty, her openness—it hit Evan hard, each word like a blow to his already bruised heart.

With his face still hidden, Evan’s head dropped to the table, a picture of defeat. “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’s voice was pleading, reaching out for him to understand.

Gathering all the strength he had left, Evan finally looked up at Sarah. The fact that she’d been seeing someone else, even platonically, cemented the bitter end of whatever they had. “So this is it? We are never going to see each other again?” His voice was a mix of resignation and a deep, lingering sadness.

“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 voice steady but her eyes telling a different story. The finality in her words was clear—they were at the end of their road.

In a poignant moment of reflection, Evan suggested a bittersweet farewell, reminiscent of their beginning. “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, recalling their first kiss with a tender nostalgia. “As I recall, I said, ‘I feel like I should kiss you.’”

Sarah, despite the storm of emotions, couldn’t help but smile back. “And I said, ‘I’m not going to stop you.’” It was a moment suspended in time, a callback to when things were simpler, happier.

He reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face with a gentleness that made her breath catch. Evan’s lips sought hers with success, their kiss sparked a well-known passion. His hands explored Sarah’s body with an instinctive grace, her blouse becoming untucked in the process. But as soon as Sarah felt the shift, felt the boundary starting to blur, panic took over. “What are you doing? We can’t do this, Evan!” Her voice was a mix of fear and a plea for sanity.

Evan stopped, his eyes searching hers. “Why not?” It was a whisper, a desperate wish for a different answer.

“We just can’t!” Sarah’s voice broke, her resolve wavering under the heavy weight of their shared past, of all the love that was still there, unresolved, unspoken.

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

Their gazes locked, and in that silence, Sarah’s answer was loud and clear. She couldn’t deny what was still there, between them, within her. The kiss that followed was filled with all the love, the pain, the what-ifs. But as reality crashed back in, Sarah pulled away, tears breaking through her usually unshakeable demeanor. “I promised myself this wouldn’t happen. I can’t do this, Evan. I’m sorry,” she managed as she backed away.

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 - The Love, Annually Plan is Created

Evan is Ready to Share his Plan

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

Riding high from the day’s wins and buzzing with excitement for what was coming up, Evan abandoned his typically cautious driving. He let loose a bit behind the wheel, zigzagging through traffic on Lakeshore Drive like he was dodging raindrops. The sunset cast a warm, golden light on his Toyota Land Cruiser, making it gleam against the backdrop of the bustling city. This ride, with its black sporty interior, was more than just a car to Evan; it was his trusty steed for both city streets and wild, untamed paths that led to his cabin in the mountains. 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.

This drive wasn’t just about getting from point A to B. It was Evan’s time to mull over the day’s highs and what awaited him. His pulse kicked up, not so much from the driving but from the buzz of nailing it with his students earlier that day and the buzz of spilling the beans on his big idea at the poker night with his crew.

The afternoon had been all about feeding his soul, hanging out with a bunch of inner-city kids who were beating the odds, thanks to the Vaughn Foundation’s programs. Today, they had knocked his socks off with their website projects, a clear win not just for the kids but for Evan too, proving that stepping outside the traditional classroom could really turn things around for these kids.

Evan was practically glowing with pride over his students’ achievements, the cherry on top was thinking about the poker night. He was about to drop a concept so fresh, he was sure it would knock everyone’s socks off. With a mix of excitement and a bit of innocence, he was all geared up, thinking, I can’t wait to see the look on their faces. They’re absolutely gonna love this plan! The breeze coming in through the cracked window mixed with his high hopes, set the stage for a night full of good vibes, laughter, and fun.

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Poker Host Liz Breaks For Chloe

Liz was right in her happy place, buzzing around her cozy Glenview home, getting everything ready for 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. Tonight, she was the epitome of casual chic, rocking comfy blue jeans and a soft sweatshirt that just screamed ‘Welcome to my chill zone.’

As she was putting the final touches on the snack spread and making sure the drinks were ice-cold, her phone suddenly lit up with “Chloe Collette” flashing on the screen. Liz felt that familiar flutter of excitement—Chloe’s calls were always a wild card of fun, drama, and chaos. Memories flooded back to when they first met; Chloe was this awkward 14-year-old, and Liz, in her college sophomore year, instantly felt that big sister pull. They clicked right away, Chloe filling that little sister gap Liz had always felt and Liz stepping up as the rock-solid big sister Chloe really needed, especially with her own sister not quite fitting that bill. Fast forward a decade, and here they were, besties with a backstory, still keeping those big-little sister vibes alive despite the miles between them.

With a quick flick, Liz turned down the tunes and switched off the stove, not about to let the cheese dip meet a fiery end. She poured herself a glass of wine and settled on a kitchen stool, hitting the speaker button to dive into whatever Chloe was bringing to the table tonight. Chloe’s voice, thick with tears, filled the room, “My boyfriend dumped me!”

Liz sighed, all too familiar with this rollercoaster. “Again? What did he say this time?”

Chloe’s voice, through sobs, spilled the latest drama, “We had another stupid fight about nothing! He called me a ‘bitch’ and told me he never wants to see me again!”

Liz, steady as ever, tried to offer some clarity, “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 reply was tinged with that mix of defiance and vulnerability, “Because he loves me, and I love him.”

Liz, the eternal patient listener, gently probed, “Really? Do you really love him, Chloe? Do you really think he loves you the way he treats you?”

Chloe hesitated, then confessed, “I don’t know, Liz, but I don’t want to be alone.”

Liz, firm yet full of care, advised, “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.”

Sounding a tad more composed, Chloe lamented, “It doesn’t matter; he hates me. He’s never going to want me back anyway.”

But then, in true Chloe fashion, the mood flipped instantly, “Oh, Liz, let me call you back tomorrow. He’s calling me right now. I need to answer before he hangs up.”

And just like that, Chloe was off, leaving Liz chuckling into her wine. There was something so predictably Chloe about these moments, like scenes from a teen drama Liz couldn’t help but find endearing. With a fond shake of her head, Liz jumped back into host mode, the night still full of promise.

Then came the sound of the front door opening, the first guest’s arrival adding a new layer of anticipation to the evening. Who could it be stepping into Liz’s perfectly prepped poker paradise? The evening was just starting, and Liz was all in for whatever the night had to throw her way.

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Evan Preps Liz for His Plan Unveiling

Evan was the first to arrive, and boy, did he make an entrance. The door swung open, and there he was, practically bouncing in with a bunch of flowers in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. Liz’s face instantly lit up, her smile as wide as Evan’s. The vibe was electric, buzzing with the kind of excitement that promises a night to remember.

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

Liz, totally caught by the surprise and warmth of the moment, grinned back. “Wow, that was some entrance! What did I do to deserve these wonderful gifts?”

Evan just shrugged, his smile not fading in the least. “No special reason. I was just in the mood to give my big sis some flowers and wine!”

Liz, now with a curious glint in her eye, teased him. “That must have been some date last night. I haven’t seen you this excited in forever.”

Evan’s smile took a slight dip, turning thoughtful. “It was nothing spectacular. It was just a decent date like they all are.”

Liz, going in for a gentle nudge, asked, “And if they’re all decent, then how come you rarely go on a second date?”

You could see Evan deflate a bit, a sigh escaping him. “Because I want more than decent. You know how much I dislike dating.”

Liz gave him a knowing look, her voice 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.”

Evan’s grin sneaked back, a bit of mischief twinkling in his eyes. “Not if they know that’s what’s happening.”

Liz’s concern showed clearly on her face. “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?”

Still riding his high, Evan assured her, “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 leaned in, her interest clearly piqued. “Figure what out?”

Evan was practically glowing with pride. “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 ‘decent’ date, I finally realized how to turn it all around!”

Liz’s curiosity was now off the charts. “And you’re gonna make me wait until everybody gets here to tell me?”

With a nod, Evan’s playful side showed. “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, stepping into the warm buzz of the soon-to-be poker night. “How’s it going, man? Good to see you!” Joe’s greeting thundered across the room, his handshake with Evan solid and hearty, like the ones you see in those feel-good movies, signaling years of friendship.

You couldn’t miss Joe if you tried. The guy was like a character straight out of those rugged outdoor ads, minus the pretense. With his reddish-brown curls just barely tamed and a beard that was more lumberjack chic than urban hipster, Joe had this way of filling the room with both his size and his larger-than-life personality. His blue eyes always had this glint of mischief or maybe it was just the reflection of his latest adventure outdoors. Decked out in what could very well be his uniform—jeans and a plaid shirt that looked like they could take on a day’s work without breaking a sweat—Joe was the epitome of a man who knew his way around both a toolbox and a barbecue grill.

Liz, in the midst of what looked like an orchestrated chaos of party prep, barely skipped a beat when the doorbell rang. With the calm of a seasoned host, she hollered over her shoulder, “That must be Alicia and Abe. Evan, can you get that?” There was a warmth in her voice, a welcoming note that made the task sound more like an invitation than a chore.

True to form, Alicia and Abe, an African-American couple known for their blend of sophistication, intellect, and grace, stood at the threshold. Liz, who’s got a thing for keeping her door open for the poker crowd, couldn’t help but find it endearing how the Robinsons stuck to ringing the bell every single time, sticking to their more traditional ways.

Alicia stepped into the room, a vision of poise and professionalism. In her mid-50s, she radiated a confidence earned through years of navigating life’s highs and lows, her role as a respected OB/GYN specializing in fertility only adding to her aura. Dressed in attire that was both stylish and suited to her esteemed profession, Alicia’s presence was both commanding and warm. Her hair and eyes, deep and expressive, seemed to reflect her rich experiences and compassionate nature.

Liz had initially sought Alicia’s expertise to navigate her fertility challenges, a journey marked by setbacks and perseverance. Over time, their relationship deepened from professional consultations to a profound friendship grounded in mutual support and understanding.

Abe, Alicia’s counterpart, brought his own distinct energy to the room. As a tenured philosophy professor at a prestigious Chicago area college, his tall, thin stature was matched by an intellect that commanded attention. Dressed with understated elegance, his choice of suits and ties, even in the most casual settings, spoke of a man who embraced his role as an educator both in appearance and demeanor. His voice, slow and deliberate, had the unique ability to make even the simplest conversations deeply engaging, reflecting his philosophical insight and the respect he held among his peers and students.

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.

Guido burst into Liz’s home with all the energy of a summer storm. He was built solid, thick and muscular, thanks to his gym routine. He was decked out in shiny gold jewelry that glittered in the light. His watch alone probably cost more than most people’s rent, and his tan? Clearly, the guy knew how to live it up outside the stock market too. His laugh filled the room, impossible to ignore, just like him.

Guido and Evan, now that was a pair you wouldn’t expect to click as well as they did. Since their college days sharing a dorm, they’ve been thick as thieves. Evan’s calm, collected vibe somehow meshed perfectly with Guido’s go-getter energy. It was a friendship that broke the mold, built on deep mutual respect for their differences.

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.

There was no love lost between Guido and Alicia. She found Guido’s womanizing ways and edgy bravado appalling. Guido found guilty pleasure in pushing her buttons. Their frequent verbal sparring confrontations were always dialed back, a nod to their respect for Liz and Evan. This dance of disagreement often became part of the poker night’s entertainment for the rest of the group.

Guido’s greeting was nothing short of grandiose. “Hey, everybody! The Guido is here! I hope you all brought your money because I am feeling lucky tonight!” His voice boomed with a mix of bravado and good-natured challenge, setting the tone for the night.

“Guido, come give your big sis a hug!” Liz exclaimed, her arms wide open in anticipation. Guido’s hug was a spectacle in itself, scooping Liz up and twirling her around with such gusto that it left her both laughing and slightly dizzy but utterly cherished.

Joe was already making his way to the poker table, ready to kick off the games. “Let the games begin!” he announced, eager to dive into the night’s competition. The stage was set for an evening full of laughter, friendly rivalry, and maybe, just maybe, a few surprises.

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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. The room burst into laughter, a perfect setup for what was coming.

Guido, never one to miss a beat, fired back, “Brace yourselves, folks. By the end of the night, it’s your money that will be finding a new home in my wallet!” The banter had everyone in stitches, pulling them closer in that moment of shared laughter.

But 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, quick to inject his brand of humor, didn’t miss a beat. “They end up hating each other.”

Alicia, with her sharp wit always at the ready, aimed her retort squarely at Guido’s cavalier remark. “How would you know? Your idea of a long-term relationship is a three-day weekend,” she delivered with a straight face, her dry humor cutting through the room and drawing a burst of laughter from everyone, Guido included.

Appreciating the jibe, Guido couldn’t help but concede, his laughter mixing with the group’s amusement. “I gotta hand it to you, Alicia, that was a good one!”

Without missing a beat, Alicia redirected the attention back to Evan, keen to cut through the banter and get to the heart of the matter. “Ignore him, Evan. Let’s hear this idea of yours,” she suggested, her tone shifting to one of earnest curiosity, signaling her readiness to delve into Evan’s anticipated revelation.

Evan, acknowledging the some level of truth in Guido’s jest with a nod, added his perspective. “Well, ‘hating’ might be strong, but you’re not entirely wrong,” he conceded. This acknowledgment sparked a variety of reactions among the group: a smug grin from Guido, a nonchalant shrug from Joe, a piqued interest from Abe, and twin expressions of astonishment from Liz and Alicia, all now fully attuned to Evan, eager for the unveil of his epiphany.

Evan, with a seriousness that momentarily dimmed the room’s earlier levity, laid out a sobering statistic, capturing everyone’s full attention. “It’s a fact that over 50% of marriages in this country end in divorce. Just look around us. Joe’s folks are the exception here. Liz and I saw our parents split when we were kids. Guido and Alicia, you both were raised by single moms. And Abe, your parents called it quits later on.” He let his words sink in, giving his friends a moment to absorb the reality he presented.

A thoughtful silence enveloped the group as they digested Evan’s words, their expressions turning introspective. The shared understanding of Evan’s point, reinforced by their own experiences, created a bond of silent agreement. Their eyes eventually drifted back to Evan, reflecting a blend of intrigue and a touch of sadness at the truth he unveiled.

With the room’s attention riveted on him again, Evan continued, doubling down on his argument. “If I had to guess, I’d say 90% of committed relationships don’t last, ending in breakup or divorce.” His claim, stark and somewhat jarring, echoed in the silence that followed.

Liz, whose belief in love and commitment was as unshakeable as her spirit, found Evan’s statistic hard to swallow. “Evan, that’s just not right. 90%? Doubtful,” she countered, her voice laced with incredulity and a hint of challenge, her expression mirroring her disbelief.

Evan, undeterred by the mixed reactions, posed another intriguing question, aiming to draw everyone into his line of thinking. “Can anyone guess how many people are registered on dating or hookup sites?” he asked, scanning the room for guesses.

Liz, though slightly annoyed by the turn the conversation was taking, couldn’t help but engage. “I don’t know, Evan—a million?” she guessed, her voice a mix of curiosity and skepticism.

Evan, ready with his research, corrected her. “Conservatively, tens and tens and tens of millions,” he stated, emphasizing “tens” to underscore the vastness of his discovery.

Liz’s skepticism persisted, finding the number hard to digest. “That can’t be right,” she contested, struggling to grasp the enormity of the figure.

Evan, confident in his findings, stood his ground. “It’s true, I researched it last night,” he assured her, eager to convince her of his point.

Guido, ever supportive, exclaimed, “My boy did his homework!”.

Evan, seizing the moment to drive his point home, continued, “With a few cringy exceptions, that means, like me, those tens of millions of website members have a 100% failure rate.” His bold statement, delivered with a mix of earnestness and a hint of frustration, lingered in the air, prompting the group to consider the implications.

Abe, with a thoughtful nod, lent his voice to the discussion, “I think you’re onto something, Evan. The students at the university are always chatting about their online dating adventures. If I had to guess, a vast majority of them, in my classes at least, are probably using or have used dating sites.” His deep, authoritative voice added a layer of gravitas to Evan’s point.

“Exactly!” Evan responded, his enthusiasm undimmed. “And think about all the single folks out there not even on the Internet looking for love.” He spread his hands wide, as if to encompass the vastness of his realization.

Guido, ever ready with a jest, couldn’t help but tease, “Get ready folks. Sounds like Evan’s about to hit us with some more stats.” His smirk suggested he was half-joking, half-preparing for Evan’s next deep dive.

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, with a blend of defensiveness and belief, couldn’t stay silent. “But look at us here. Our relationships are strong, aren’t they?” Her voice had that edge, showing she was ready to stand up for the love stories present in the room.

Evan treaded carefully, not wanting to step on any toes. “Absolutely, I’m not saying otherwise. It’s just, in my observation, the energy in most relationships doesn’t stay as high as when it first sparked. That initial year, often called the ‘honeymoon phase,’ tends to be the peak.” He paused, noticing Liz leaning in, maybe gearing up for a rebuttal. Choosing his words with care, he avoided steering the conversation into more sensitive waters.

Evan’s eyes then took on a distant gleam, his voice filled with a hint of nostalgia. “There’s something irreplaceable about that first year. The excitement of the first kiss, the warmth of holding hands for the first time, the exhilaration of new intimacy, finding those special little spots to eat, the first getaway together.” He stopped, momentarily caught up in the memory, a faint smile on his lips.

However, Evan’s tone grew heavier, his look turning downwards. “But as time passes, it feels like the effort fades. Arguments become more frequent, the eagerness to see each other wanes, until sometimes, it fades to nothing. And before you know it,” his voice dropped, grappling with the reality, “you’re signing divorce papers, or just parting ways, left with nothing but heartache.” His eyes lifted, meeting those gathered, sharing a silent understanding. “It seems like keeping the spark from that first year alive is a battle even the strongest couples face.” The atmosphere was thick with a shared reflection, everyone silently mulling over Evan’s insights on the challenges of sustaining love’s initial fire.

Alicia leaned in, her voice reflecting both wisdom and personal experience. “Evan, it’s important to remember that each love story is its own. For Abe and me, it’s not about constant public displays of affection; it’s about a deep, respectful connection. This respect extends to understanding the sacrifices we make for our careers,” she said, providing a counterpoint to Evan’s earlier points, adding depth to the conversation with her perspective.

Abe added his own insights, his calm demeanor underlining his words. “Evan, while I find your ideas intriguing, the notion of maintaining a relationship’s intensity at its initial peak is unrealistic. Life, by its nature, involves ebbs and flows. It’s about finding balance rather than striving for a constant high,” he commented, gently challenging Evan’s premise with a philosophical lens.

Liz, reflecting inwardly, shared her own struggles. “I have to confess, Joe and I sometimes let the daily grind get the best of us. It’s easier to unwind in front of the TV than to actively engage with each other,” she admitted, her honesty exposing the common challenges couples face in maintaining connection.

Evan quickly interjected, his tone full of concern. “Liz, my goal wasn’t to criticize or make anyone feel guilty, especially not you,” he said, seeking to ease any discomfort his observations might have caused.

Liz responded with understanding, her voice warmer. “I know you weren’t accusing anyone. Sure, the initial excitement Joe and I felt has subsided, but it’s been replaced by a deeper, more meaningful bond. Our love has grown stronger through both joy and adversity. Evan, in all your calculations, you’ve overlooked the most crucial element—love,” she concluded, highlighting the enduring strength and significance of her relationship with Joe, offering a hopeful counterpoint to Evan’s analytical approach.

Evan, visibly shaken by the depth of his own feelings, let out a sigh, the room’s atmosphere heavy with empathy. “Love, for me, is a closed chapter. I had my chance at true love, and now it’s gone,” he admitted, his voice thick with emotion. The silence that followed was palpable, everyone processing the raw honesty of his words.

Liz, ever the protector, stepped in with a hug that spoke volumes, pulling back to look at Evan with eyes brimming with compassion. “Evan, you’re only 29 years old and have your whole life ahead of you. Love hasn’t left you for good,” she assured him, her voice a beacon of optimism in the somber room.

Evan’s frustration surfaced, a rare sight. “Really, Liz?” he shot back, skepticism edging his words. He then called out to Joe, who had been engrossed in shuffling cards. “Joe,” he asked, once he had Joe’s attention, “if things with Liz ended, could you see yourself with someone else?”

Joe’s response was immediate and unwavering. “Absolutely not. Liz is my one and only. There’s no ‘next’ for me.”

Turning the focus back to Liz, Evan probed, “And you, Liz? If things didn’t work out with Joe, would there be someone else for you?”

Liz, caught off guard by Evan’s probing, retorted, “Evan, that’s an unfair question.”

Evan persisted, his point hitting home. “It’s the most relevant question there is. We’ve all found our once-in-a-lifetime love. If I still had mine, the quiet nights, the routine—it’d all be worth it, knowing we’re in it together.”

Liz, usually so in tune with Evan, found herself grappling with an unusual sense of irritation. Evan’s defiance, a stark contrast to his usual demeanor, left her unsettled.

Sensing the growing tension, Alicia intervened, aiming to redirect the conversation. “Evan, what’s the end goal here? You mentioned an epiphany and a breakthrough idea?”

Her words seemed to break the spell of gloom, reigniting Evan’s initial excitement. With renewed vigor, he prepared to share his vision, his expression alight with the promise of unveiling his unconventional solution to the complexities of love and relationships.

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.

“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.

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, leaning back with a smirk, couldn’t resist joking, “I’ll happily take her off your hands. Shoot me her number, will ya?” Guido said, half hoping Evan would take him seriously and send her number his way.

Alicia, quick as ever, shot back, “Dream on, Guido. She’s way out of your league. Remember, Evan mentioned she’s intelligent.” Her retort sent a wave of laughter through the group, Alicia’s wit shining through once again.

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

Evan, pulling the focus back to his narrative, pressed on, “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 rarely wanted a second date, and never a third. 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 tone filled with empathy and concern, softly said, “Oh, Evan.”

Abe leaned forward. This was getting interesting. “So, what groundbreaking idea did this epiphany lead to?”

Evan rubbed his hands together, the gesture full of uncontainable excitement. “I’m glad you asked.” An exuberant grin spread across his face. “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 shifted in her seat, curiosity piqued. “And what’s this ‘next best thing’?”

“Well, since dating’s been a bust and finding ‘the one’ a second time is nothing more than a fairytale,” Evan leaned in conspiratorially, “I thought of something kinda out there. Why not find someone cool? Not just a pretty face, but someone I actually enjoy 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, and avoid all that mess when things inevitably start to go downhill.”

He scanned his friends’ faces, searching for a spark of enthusiasm to match his own. Instead, he found expressions ranging from bewilderment to outright shock. Liz, in particular, looked completely blown away – shock wouldn’t even begin to cover it.

Liz sputtered, “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?”

“It’s not about ‘dating’ for a year, Liz,” Evan protested, a defensive edge creeping into his voice. “It’s about sharing a meaningful relationship for that time. But yeah,” he shrugged, “finding someone agreeable to such a proposition might be a challenge.”

Alicia broke the silence with a touch of skepticism. “Evan, any woman worth spending a year with isn’t going to sign up for an expiration date on the relationship.”

Evan slumped back in his chair, deflated. “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 grunted, unable to mask her disbelief. “You think?” Liz said in a sarcastic tone.

Evan furrowed his brow, a mix of worry and determination washing over him. “I don’t feel great about not being able to disclose my plan upfront,” he admitted, drumming his fingers on the table. “But, I think I’ve found a way to compensate for the deceit and the hurt that an unexpected breakup might cause.”

Liz was skeptical. “And how do you propose to manage that?”

A glimmer of resolve appeared in Evan’s 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, and ensuring her every need is met. I know that’s something I can commit to for a year.”

Liz crossed her arms, her amusement fading. “So, you believe being Mr. Perfect for a year makes up for the heartbreak of a blindside breakup?” Her voice held a sharp edge.

Evan nodded firmly. “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.”

Liz shook her head, genuine concern for her brother etched on her face. “Evan, you’re my brother, and I understand this is coming from a place of pain and loneliness,” she said, her voice softening. “But I cannot, in good conscience, stand by and watch you go through with such a ridiculous plan.”

Guido shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Look, Evan’s approach might be a bit out there, but calling it ridiculous? That’s a stretch.”

Liz spun towards him, incredulity written across her features. “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 slumped back against his chair, a wave of resignation washing over him. “I’ve been wrestling with this idea, thinking it through from every angle. Then It dawned on me that I wouldn’t have to lie per se—just avoid revealing my plan to break up after a year.”

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

The room hung heavy with the gravity of her words, pressing down on Evan’s hopeful spirit. Internally, Evan was torn, grappling with his silent rebuttal. 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? He pondered, contemplating the bleak options before him: solitude or proceeding with his radical plan.

Seeing Evan’s internal struggle, Guido interjected, aiming to lighten the mood while supporting 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’s concern softened her tone as she replied, “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, ever ready to challenge the status quo, didn’t back down. “So what you’re saying, Liz, is that Evan will never find true love again?” he countered, sparking a moment of silent contemplation among everyone in the room.

Alicia, visibly upset by the turn of the conversation, defended Liz, “Liz didn’t say that, Guido! Don’t twist her words.”

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

Liz, trying to keep the peace yet clearly puzzled, asked, “Guido, why would you think I’m saying Evan’s never gonna find true love again?”

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

Liz, intrigued yet perplexed, nodded in agreement, “That’s the plan, isn’t it?”

As the conversation unfolded, Guido argued that relationships are unpredictable and that Evan’s plan might not necessarily end as expected. Suggesting Evan might fall in love with the first woman he tries this with, indicating a breakup might 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’s response was nonverbal, her departure to another room leaving a suspenseful silence in her wake, her silence leaving Evan in a state of hopeful anticipation, wondering if his words had swayed her heart.

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Love, Annually Gets a Rulebook

Liz returned, notepad and pen in hand, her expression all business, ready to lend her support to Evan’s unconventional plan—but on her terms. She sat down, fixing Evan with a look that was half skepticism, half resolve. “Evan, honestly, this whole scheme sounds crazy to me. But it’s clear you’re set on this. If you want my support, we’re setting some rules to protect both you, and any woman you rope into this... adventure. I’m in, but only if you promise to stick to the rules we come up with, deal?”

Evan’s response was immediate; his energy infectious as he sprang up and pulled Liz into an enthusiastic side hug, planting a brotherly kiss on her cheek in a burst of gratitude. “Deal! You’re the best, Liz. Seriously, thank you!”

Liz, taking the lead with a practical air, looked around the room at their gathered friends. “Alright, team, we’ve got a wealth of wisdom and insight here. Let’s brainstorm some safeguards for Evan’s... let’s call it an ‘experiment.’ I’ll start us off. And just so we’re clear, I’m agreeing to this madness because I’m hoping against hope that Evan, you’ll find someone special enough to make you ditch this one-year plan.”

She paused, her expression thoughtful, perhaps wrestling with her own doubts about the feasibility of Evan’s plan. “And, well, if you’re not in love by the end of it, I guess parting ways would’ve happened regardless,” she added, trying to rationalize the situation, seeking a glimmer of sense in the madness.

The room, filled with their closest friends and family, turned into a makeshift council, ready to draft the laws of ‘Love, Annually,’ their faces a mix of concern, curiosity, and a willingness to support Evan in his quest, however unconventional it might be.

Liz assumed command, her tone striking a balance between authority and a willingness to collaborate. “Alright, let’s lay down the foundation—Rule #1: Just as you’ve alluded to, Evan, be the partner she’s looking for, attentive and caring, from the get-go to the end. Rule #2: Unless she poses a threat of some sort, once you commit, you’re in it for the year, no cold feet, even if she doesn’t turn out to be the woman of your dreams. Commit to being Mr. Perfect, no exceptions. And Rule #3,” she paused, ensuring she had everyone’s attention, “If things get rocky, you’re not allowed to dodge the first two rules by making her want to end things. These rules are in place to make you think twice before jumping in. They’re set in stone. Who wants to add to the list?”

Joe, ready to show his support, was quick to jump in. “I’ve got one,” he announced, hand in the air, “Considering there might be hard feelings post-breakup, it’s wise not to date someone from around here. The last thing Evan needs is awkward run-ins at the supermarket or a local restaurant. So, Rule #4: she should live at least a 45-minute drive away, considering light traffic.”

Liz was already noting down Joe’s input. “Good point, Joe. Evan, does that work for you?”

Evan’s reply was instant, his optimism undimmed. “Totally on board!” His voice conveyed genuine excitement. The formulation of these rules, rather than feeling like constraints, ignited in him a sense of cautious optimism and the thrill of navigating uncharted waters, a delicate equilibrium he hadn’t anticipated needing.

Alicia’s voice was both caring and commanding as she addressed Evan, “Evan, considering your soft spot for kids, it’s crucial that children aren’t caught up in this scheme. Rule #5: steer clear of single moms for these relationships.”

Evan, showing a look of sincere appreciation, agreed, “That’s a really important point. Honestly, it hadn’t crossed my mind. Thanks for pointing that out, Alicia.” His acknowledgment showed his respect for Alicia’s insight.

With a nod of approval at Evan’s response, Alicia looked around the room, “Glad you see it that way. Abe, what about you? Any ideas?”

Abe, who’d been thoughtfully following the conversation, finally weighed in. “Well, this might blur into more than one rule, but it’s vital that this doesn’t mimic a typical relationship. Getting entangled in each other’s social and family circles usually happens, but that could complicate things for us. If she becomes part of our group, it could lead to awkward situations. And the deeper you get into her social network, especially with kids, such as nieces and nephews are involved, the tougher the eventual separation. So, Rule #6: keep a distance from her close social and family circles and likewise for us.”

Liz, mulling over the conversation and reflecting on Evan’s affection for children and their family dynamics, chimed in with a thoughtful note. “Evan, following these guidelines about children is non-negotiable. It’s not just for their sake but yours too. You have such a big heart for kids. If you were with someone who has children, I fear you’d stay out of obligation, not love, just to spare them the breakup’s hurt. You deserve to find true love, not settle out of convenience.”

Evan, overwhelmed by the support and guidance from his friends and family, expressed his gratitude, “I can’t thank you all enough. Abe, Liz, this rule session is a lifesaver. I was on a fast track to disaster. Alright, Guido, you’re up. Hit me with your best shot,” he said, leaning back with an anticipatory grin, ready for Guido’s typically bold input.

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 leaned in, her empathy evident as she considered the potential impact of Evan’s plan. “We gotta think about the woman in this scenario. If everything’s going great and then it just ends, that’s gonna be tough on her. How about we plan the breakup for the Friday after your year’s up? Gives her the weekend to start healing. But, flexibility is key. If she’s facing something big, you wait. Break it off when it’ll cause the least pain,” she proposed.

Liz, nodding in agreement, saw the sense in Alicia’s suggestion. “Choosing the right moment to end things is crucial. Evan, you need to handle the breakup with care. That’s rule #9 for us. And rule #10,” Liz continued, her voice growing tender, “I hope you fall for the first woman you try this with. But if not, give yourself a break before jumping into something new. Say, a two-month gap before dating again?”

Evan’s response was a mix of gratitude and eagerness. “Thank you, everyone. This discussion’s been enlightening. I’m more than ready to try this out, knowing I’ve got these rules to guide me,” he expressed, his optimism undimmed.

Liz’s gaze swept across the group, her expression softening. “Thank you all for weighing in on this. It means the world.” She then fixed Evan with a look that was both playful and serious. “Just so we’re clear, Evan, I’m backing you on this conditionally. Stick to the rules, or you’re on your own.”

Evan met her gaze, his eyes sparkling with both humor and respect. “You’re the boss,” he assured her.

Liz let out a gentle laugh, lightening the mood. “Alright, I’ll tidy up these rules and get copies to everyone tonight. Go ahead and start the poker game. I’ve got a bit more to do 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.