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# Chapter "The Divorce"

## Scene: "Why?"

***Seven years after “The Kiss”…***

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

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

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## Scene: "Broken Vow"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Crossroads of the Heart"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Evan Demands Answers"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Understanding and Goodbyes"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "The Last Kiss"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter "The Love, Annually Plan is Created"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Meet the Poker Gang"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evan was irked by Guido’s suggestion, Guido’s nuts, I’m never going to fall in love again. Evan’s annoyance with Guido’s claims gave way to feeling a 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 left Evan wondering if his words had pushed too hard or swayed her heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Official Rules and Guidelines"

Evan’s Relationship Rules

Rule #1

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

Rule #2

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

Rule #3

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

Rule #4

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

Rule #5

Evan cannot date single mothers.

Rule #6

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

Rule #7

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

Rule #8

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

Rule #9

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

Rule #10

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

# Chapter "The Universe Delivers"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Maggie’s Dating Woes"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Evan Meets Maggie"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Laura and Maggie Google Evan"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter "Fun at the Fall Festival"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m 29.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“May I ask why?” Evan asked sincerely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A flicker of surprise, mixed with a hint of skepticism, crossed Maggie’s face. “That’s because you have it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "A “Great Night” Kiss"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Evan has Mixed Feelings"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter "Maggie’s Indoor Picnic"

## Scene: "Thresholds of Hope and Plans"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Maggie Meets Trish and Liz"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Scene: "Maggie’s Indoor Picnic"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you so much!” Maggie’s warmth was genuine. “I can’t believe you did all this. Did you make it yourself?”

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

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

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

“I can’t wait to try it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evan chuckled. “Um...no. The Vaughn siblings have zero artistic talent. We’re lucky if we can manage a stick figure. Those were painted by Liz’s young friend, Chloe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Absolutely,” Maggie replied, her smile matching his. “Just please try not to make me laugh too hard. My feet might not survive it.”