The Offer

Chapter 1

Alan let out an exasperated sigh as Sean pointed his fork at him, that smug grin plastered on his face. The two of them were hunched over a cluttered table of cafeteria trays in the campus dining hall, packed to the brim with students grabbing lunch between classes. Sunlight slipped through the tall windows, catching on the faded posters on the walls and the constant shuffle of backpacks and chatter all around them.

"Come on, man, admit it — you totally lost your shit last night. Dancing shirtless on the table? What was that? Did you think it was a runway or something?" Sean laughed, eyes gleaming with mischief as he stole a fry from Alan's plate.



Alan shook his head, pretending to be offended while chewing his dry ham sandwich.

"If Larry hadn't sucked so bad at beer pong, we wouldn't have had to drink that much. It's your fault anyway — you're the one who insisted we play until sunrise."

Across from them, Larry — messy hair, hoodie with the university logo — raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Hey, I drank just as much as you did. But I didn't end up doing a half-ass striptease. You're lucky nobody filmed that."

He burst out laughing, and the three friends fell into playful banter, their voices blending into the background noise of clattering trays, bursts of laughter, and dozens of overlapping conversations.

The campus buzzed with mid-autumn energy, red-brick buildings glowing under the pale sun, lawns still green despite the recent rain that had left puddles here and there.

Alan and Sean, both second-year civil engineering students, usually spent their breaks together — decompressing between exhausting classes on soil mechanics and structural systems. Larry, a first-year law student, had joined them by chance after an orientation party a few weeks back. His enthusiasm for partying more than made up for his lack of legal knowledge.

Suddenly, two hands landed on Sean's shoulders from behind.

"Boo!" squealed Bella, her high-pitched voice slicing through the noise like a laugh in motion.

Sean jolted, spilling water all over his jeans.

"Jesus, Bella!" he groaned, though his tone was more amused than annoyed, cheeks flushing under his scruffy beard.

The whole table erupted in laughter as she apologized with a quick kiss on his cheek — confirming, for anyone who didn't already know, that they'd been a couple for months.

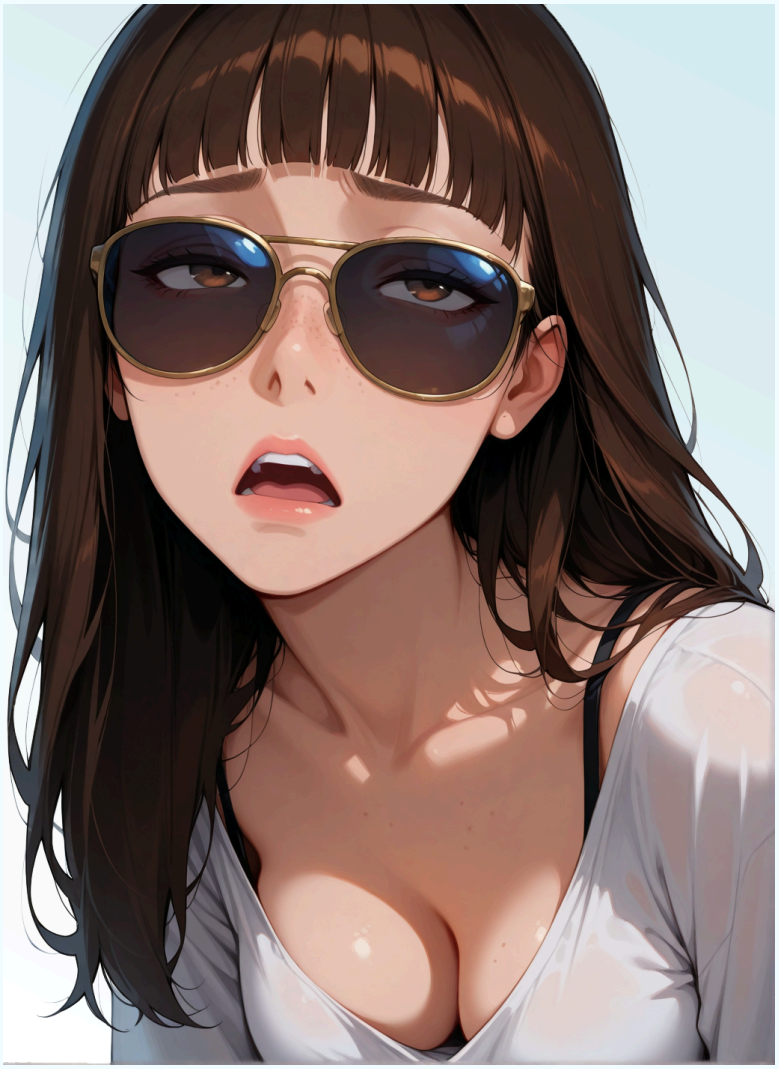
Bella, with her wavy chestnut hair and infectious grin, always brought a spark to the group.

A moment later, Madison appeared with a tray in hand and sunglasses perched on her nose despite the cafeteria's dim lighting. She dropped into the seat beside Alan, setting her backpack on the floor with a dramatic sigh. For a beat, the table went quiet — then Alan cracked first.

"Rough day? You look like you’re about to go undercover or something, wearing those shades in here."

Madison pushed the sunglasses up just long enough to reveal bloodshot eyes framed by smudged makeup.

"Go to hell," she muttered, elbowing him harder than necessary.



Alan chuckled.

"Hey, don’t blame me. You’re the one who kept downing shots like a champ last night."

Bella, still laughing, whispered something to Sean — but Madison cut her off with a glare.

"Don’t even start."

Too late. Bella went on.

"She had to run out of class this morning to puke in the bathroom. Tried to be subtle about it, but yeah, not really. The professor looked at her like she’d just confessed a crime."

Everyone burst out laughing again, and even Madison cracked a resigned smile as she stabbed a forkful of salad.

Bella and Madison, both third-year economics students, had been inseparable since freshman year — opposites that somehow clicked. Madison’s sharp wit and no-filter attitude balanced Bella’s easy charm and bubbly warmth.

Amid the clamor of voices and clinking cutlery, Madison turned to Alan.



"By the way, Mom wanted to know if we're coming home this weekend. I told her we'd get there around late morning. That work for you? She's been nagging us to wash Dad's car for weeks."

Alan swallowed a bite before answering.

"Yeah, sure. I can drive if you want, so you can nap on the way."

"We'll see who's less hungover if we go out tonight," she shot back with a smirk.

Larry, half-listening while scrolling through his phone, perked up.

"Speaking of — there's a party at Dylan's place tonight. Big one. Housewarming or something. Supposed to be huge."

Bella's eyes widened.

"Wait, *the* Dylan? The guy who throws those legendary parties everyone talks about for months?"

"Yup," Larry grinned. "Friend of a friend invited me. Open bar, heated pool, the works. The dude's mansion is insane."

Dylan was practically campus folklore — the rich kid whose family owned half the city's real estate. His Victorian house on the riverbank was the stuff of stories: sprawling gardens, priceless art, rooms you could get lost in. An invite to one of his parties was like a golden ticket.

The table buzzed with sudden excitement.

"I'm in," said Sean, eyes lighting up.

"I've got work till eleven," Alan sighed. He waited tables to cover rent for his shoebox apartment just off campus — tiny, but convenient, with a scenic view of the parking lot.

"Same," added Madison. "A mountain of paperwork to finish first. But after that? I'm free."

Everyone groaned in sympathy.

"You two should just move in together already," Sean suggested, yet again, wiping his wet jeans with a napkin.

Alan shook his head.

"For the tenth time, no. I like having my own space."

"Not in a million years," Madison added. "He leaves socks everywhere and forgets dishes for days. The smell would kill me."



They all laughed, imagining the disaster.

Madison rented a small two-room apartment on campus — functional, a bit impersonal, decorated with travel posters of places she dreamed of visiting. Alan lived nearby, in an equally modest building with paper-thin walls. Their parents, humble teachers from a small northern town, had raised them to be independent. They helped with groceries now and then, but otherwise, the siblings were on their own.

Whenever things got rough — a missed rent payment, a rushed move — they had each other's backs.

Beneath the teasing and arguments, their bond was solid, built from years of shared struggle and loyalty.

Bella glanced at her watch and nudged Madison.

"We gotta run. Class is all the way across campus, and the professor hates latecomers."

She leaned down to kiss Sean on the lips.

"See you tonight, my love. Don't start the fun without us!"

The girls grabbed their things and disappeared into the crowd, laughter echoing behind them.

The guys exchanged knowing looks, the spark of anticipation already in the air.

"So," Sean asked with a smirk, "you guys planning on going home alone tonight?"

Larry nearly choked on his food.

"God, I hope not. I'm dying here. Still not over Ophélie though. It's been three months and I'm still hung up on her."



Alan grinned.

"Time to move on, man. Plenty of fish in the… campus."

"Easy for you to say," Larry shot back, pointing at him. "You never get attached to anyone. You're like some emotional ghost."

Alan shrugged, smiling.

"I just know this isn't where I'm gonna find my happily-ever-after princess."

They all laughed again, the mood easy and warm — and as the lunch break came to an end, the thought of the night ahead hung in the air, electric and promising.