The Offer

Chapter 18

Madison got home from class earlier than expected that afternoon, the drag of exhaustion settling over her like an unwelcome shadow, pulling at her every step.

The apartment felt tighter than ever, the walls crowding in the moment she stepped through the door, slinging her bag against the wall with a dull thud that echoed through the emptiness.



Last night had been hell—fitful and fragmented, jolted awake by those gut-wrenching flashes that left her drenched in sweat, her pulse racing as if she were still bolting from that hotel room. She felt hollowed out, eyelids drooping, body numb from a weariness that went deeper than bones, just this sour knot twisting in her gut, refusing to loosen.

She was doing a bit better, or at least she told herself that, shoving the memories aside like stubborn grit underfoot, even though it was futile right now; every push to forget only stirred the horror back up, that clammy revulsion clinging to her skin no

matter how long she stood under the scalding water.

She drifted through the place aimlessly, pacing from the cramped kitchenette to the tiny living room, grabbing a glass of water she left forgotten on the counter, flipping channels on the TV without seeing a thing, just to drown out the stifling quiet. A pile of homework loomed on her desk—economic analyses to draft, chapters to cram for an exam creeping up like a silent predator—but the will to tackle it had evaporated, replaced by this sluggish haze that locked her limbs, pinning her to the couch like a limp ragdoll. Her phone buzzed, making her flinch hard, a raw instinct that clamped her throat tight.

It was Larry, in the group chat: “So swing by whenever tonight! Pizza and beers on deck!”

Madison let out a heavy sigh, the sound slipping from her chest like a quiet surrender, setting the phone on her thigh with a wince.



The thought of going out, faking smiles and laughs with the crew, turned her stomach. And that pulled her mind back to Alan—that name lingering in her head like a slow toxin, churning her insides without any clear reason she could pin down.

She had zero desire to see him again, not after everything; deep down, she was pinning the blame on him, as if he hadn’t been in her corner that night, as if he’d picked the madness over shielding her, ignoring—or burying—how wrecked the whole mess must have left him too, scarred in ways she didn’t want to picture. She swatted the idea away with a flick of her hand, like shooing off a phantom buzz… except she hadn’t checked since yesterday. Phone still in her grip, she pulled up her banking app out of habit,

scrolling idly to glance at her balance, which had been teetering on the edge of overdraft lately.

And then it hit her like a gut punch: the money was there, that absurd amount glaring back at her from the screen like a fresh brand—twenty-one thousand dollars, a number that seared into her vision.

She stared at it for what felt like forever, breath shallow, the truth crashing over her that this had been orchestrated from the start; she'd walked right into it, accepting Rebecah's invite despite the nagging doubts, the inner alarms she'd brushed off.

A bitter surge of regret clawed up her throat, making her queasy—she'd stepped into the trap with eyes wide open, all for this cash that now felt tainted, like a self-inflicted wound she couldn't take back.



A little later that evening, as the light outside had shifted to a dusky gray, barely seeping through the curtains, another buzz yanked her from her daze. She'd shifted to the dishes to keep her hands busy, scrubbing plates under the lukewarm stream in a mindless routine, just something to fill the hollow ache inside.

Alan's name popped up on the screen, and it froze her in place, hands dripping, a chill snaking up her back despite the water's warmth. Her pulse quickened, a sly dread clamping down on her chest, but curiosity—or maybe some buried urge to twist the knife—won out; she wiped her fingers on a crumpled dishtowel and tapped open the message.

“I don’t get what you told Bella. We need to meet up, okay? She thinks we’re fighting…”

He sounded baffled, a touch pissed off, like he couldn’t wrap his head around why she’d spun that whole story out of thin air. Madison stared at the words, a sour tang coating her tongue, unsure how to reply; an automatic “OK” shot from her fingers, curt and detached, like a reflex to shut it down without diving in. But before she could set the phone aside and get back to the sink, his reply pinged back almost instantly: “When?”

That set her off, a raw surge of anger flushing her face—this pushiness, this casual tone like nothing had happened, like everything was fine, ordinary, while she felt like the only one drowning in this mess, stuck carrying it all alone, and he seemed… untouched, or at least that’s what her worn-out mind whispered to fuel the simmering fury.

She jabbed out “Whenever,” tossed the phone onto the couch with a muffled thump, and dove back into the dishes, hands shaking just a bit, her thoughts churning against her will, the unease creeping in like a shadow she couldn’t shake off anymore.



About half an hour later, bundled up in a worn blanket on the couch, knees tucked tight to her chest to curl into a makeshift shell, a knock at the door jolted her hard, like a bolt cracking through the room.

Madison instinctively turned down the TV volume, some pointless documentary droning in the background, and held still for a second, her heart hammering wildly. She wasn’t expecting anyone—fuck, she didn’t want to see anyone, not tonight, not with that heaviness still pressing on her lungs, leaving her raw and unguarded even in her own space. But a voice cut through the quiet, loud and familiar from the other side:

“Madi? It’s me, Alan!”

Right away, a wave of intense awkwardness hit her, like she was suddenly stripped bare, fully exposed, her face heating up even as an icy grip tightened in her veins. What? How? Why was he here, at this hour, without warning? Her mind spun in a frenzy, a storm of questions choking her up.

She grabbed her phone with a trembling hand, the screen lighting up on an unread message: “OK, on my way.”

Shit. She’d replied without thinking, and he… he’d taken it literally, like an open door. A deep breath shuddered through her, bracing for what felt like an impossible confrontation, one she’d been dreading in her gut, and she called out in a strained, raspy voice:

“Coming!”



She was in pajamas—a snug pair of shorts clinging to her thighs, a tee… too thin, only ramping up the discomfort. She jumped up clumsily and padded to the door on tiptoe, her heart pounding like a drum. She cracked it open at first, just a sliver, then wider when her eyes met Alan’s, him standing there with his usual vibe, a hint of impatience.

“Finally—” he started, but he cut off sharp, picking up on the discomfort etched across her face, the drawn features, the averted gaze. His look softened, turning apologetic, almost guilty. “Wait… you didn’t see my message, huh? Shit… Bella told me I shouldn’t—whatever, forget it… You… gonna let me in?”

Madison stood frozen for a beat, mortified, letting him ramble without cutting in, her eyes drifting down over him despite herself—his rumpled jacket, faded jeans, that familiar presence that now felt invasive, alien. She blanked on basic politeness, just planted there like a fool, her brain stalled in shock from the sudden intrusion. Shit, she snapped inwardly, shaking her head to clear the fog. She stepped aside at last, murmuring a barely audible

“Come in,”

and shut the door behind him with a click that echoed like a verdict. In the kitchen, rummaging through a cabinet to give herself something to do, she mustered the nerve to ask casually, even if her voice wavered:

“What’s up…?”

Alan, settled on the couch now, elbows on his knees, suddenly looked awkward too, dodging her eyes for a moment before replying in a low, hesitant tone:

“It’s about Bella. We gotta get our stories straight so she stops bugging me about it. Tell her we’re good now, or something like that… I don’t know, make up whatever, but it has to match.”

Madison came back with a steaming mug in hand, the sharp scent of black tea cutting through the already thick unease in the air, a half-hearted stab at pretending things were ordinary when they sure as hell weren’t.

She set it down on the coffee table in front of Alan, dodging his eyes, then dropped into a chair across from him, keeping a safe gap, as if the couch were off-limits territory.

No tea for her—she couldn’t stomach it, her insides too knotted up to handle anything.

Without thinking, she folded her arms over her chest, clutching at the thin fabric of her tee, and crossed her legs too, throwing up a physical shield against that raw gnaw of feeling way too underdressed in front of him, laid bare in these clingy shorts that hugged her skin, dragging up echoes of those times she’d been truly stripped down, raw and

open under stares she was desperate to scrub from her mind. She let out a long breath, a mix of embarrassment and frustration bubbling up inside her like a bitter swell.



“Okay, I’ll tell her I’ve forgiven you…”

Alan let out a tense chuckle, low and strained, slicing through the quiet before he lifted the mug to his lips for a sip, like he was hiding his own unease. The strain built slow and sneaky, weighing down the space between them, turning the room into a cramped box where every breath hitched louder. Madison’s brow furrowed, her annoyance edging out the discomfort for a second.

“What’s so funny?”

He set the mug down with a soft clink, shrugging awkwardly, his gaze skittering away.

“Well, I don’t know… What are you gonna tell her exactly? And why am I the bad guy in this?”

Madison blinked, not quite getting it, deep down convinced he had some hand in this made-up mess she’d cooked up—as if his part in the whole thing, real or imagined, made it fair to cast him as the villain.

She answered without any real truth, the words coming out flat and dodgy.

“Okay, whatever… I’ll say we’ve sorted out our differences…”



Alan tensed up a little, not exactly mad but more thrown off, confused, his voice dropping like he was piecing together a riddle that didn't fit.

"Madi… Why'd you tell her we had a fight? I come off like a total asshole… You know, we're both in this shit…"

That's when Madison forced out a sharp, sour laugh, barely covering the spike of resentment twisting through her gut.

"You sure don't seem all that messed up about it,"

she shot back sarcastically, eyes narrowing like she was probing for a crack. Alan's jaw dropped for a beat, stunned and let down, his face tightening.

"What? Wait, you think… you're the only one she screwed over?"

At the mention of Rebecah—that name hitting like a lash—Madison flushed deep, a creeping dread clamping her throat even tighter, the memories flooding back unbidden. She snapped back, voice tight and on guard.

"You just don't seem all that bothered, that's all…"

Alan shot up straight on the couch, muscles coiled like a spring ready to snap, his wide eyes locking onto hers with a raw disbelief that edged into hurt.

"Wait, are you for real? What the hell do you mean by that?"

Madison's face burned with a flush that hit like a sudden spike, and she clamped up for a moment, lips pressed thin, before muttering a barely-there

"Nothing…"

dodging his stare like meeting it would drag that night right back into the light, too sharp, too damn close. Alan's temper flared then, his voice cranking up a notch, frustration and confusion twisting tight in his throat.

"Fuck, Madi… How can you…? Shit, you think you're the only one wrecked by this? That I had a great time and just wiped that—that whole night clean from my head!?"



She stayed silent, arms hugging herself even harder, the barrier cracking under her own nagging uncertainties, her gaze glued to some spot on the floor to avoid those eyes that stirred up way too much. He kept going, words tumbling out in a rush, his tone fracturing here and there like pulling them free was tearing him up.

"I can't stop replaying it, I… fuck, I know it's messed up, we never should've gone there, I knew she'd twist us around… I… damn it!"

His anger boiled over for real, fists clenched on his knees, breaths coming quicker.

"You don't believe me?! I feel like total shit…"

Tears welled at the edges of his eyes, small and held back, exposing a raw edge he hated letting show, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper.

"I can't focus on anything, hell, I even had that fucking nightmare this morning, I—"

He cut off abrupt, words lodged in his throat, a hot flush creeping over his face like wildfire, out of control, already kicking himself for letting it slip, his body going rigid in the heavy quiet that followed. Madison, who'd been holding back until then, latched onto that last bit like a tainted hook, a mocking edge—sharp and petty, with a bitchy sting—cutting through her tone despite the gnawing discomfort.

"A what?"

Alan shrugged it off, awkward, brows knitting to cover his fluster, staring at the floor like it might swallow him whole. It clicked for Madison in a brutal instant, the fragments slotting together with a clarity that chilled her.



"Wait… you—no way?"

Seeing his squirm, that lingering red on his cheeks and his shifty eyes, it sealed her suspicion, twisting her gut into a vise. She lost it then, arms folding tighter over herself, yanking down the hem of her tee on instinct like she could hide away, the awkwardness flipping to a scorching fury.

"You're—fuck, don't tell me you dreamed about—you're such a disgusting pig! Pervert! You make me sick!"

Alan cut her off mid-rant, yelling louder, his voice booming through the room like a storm breaking, tears streaking openly down his face now.

"But fuck, you think it's my fault!? I didn't ask for any of this! You're throwing shit at me I had zero control over! It wasn't

me, not really—my head just glitched out, that's all! I didn't choose to have that goddamn dream!"

He fired back with a frantic desperation, words spilling to throw up some kind of shield against the accusation slicing right through him, his body shaking with the strain of laying it out, refusing to let that nightmare rip them apart any further than it already had.

Madison flushed deep, a stifling heat crawling up her face and neck, her whole body turning against her, laying her raw edges bare right in front of him.

She felt wrecked, her pulse slamming wild in her chest, a relentless throb pounding at her temples, churning fury and shame into a volatile mix—pissed at him for daring to have that dream, even without the gritty details, and mostly mortified, gutted by the thought that he'd pictured her, her body, those forbidden flashes that stalked them both, no matter what twisted shape they took. She piled on the fuel, unloading everything in a rush, words bursting out like a dam giving way, humiliated but powerless to hold back any longer.



"Yeah? And that night, you weren't in control either, were you? When you were this close to fucking me? When you were staring at me like I was just some slab of meat? When—fuck, when you unloaded all over me without holding back, like a goddamn beast!"

She spilled it all, the memories surging up uninvited, her voice rising in a muffled yell, face burning, eyes gleaming with a fury that barely hid the deep-seated disgust gnawing at her insides.

Alan sat stunned, mouth hanging open, eyes wide like he'd taken a solid hook to the jaw, giving him a beat to fire back—that dragging silence, thick and damning, telling Madison she'd nailed it, that he had no quick comeback because it was all real, etched into their shared wreckage.

He finally spoke, choking back the sobs, tears hovering at the rims of his eyes, his tone ragged and unsteady.

"I... look, it was just a natural reaction, like some knee-jerk thing, fuck... I wasn't myself, I'd shut off my brain, everything spiraled out of control in there..."

Madison broke down then, crying from rage, from terror, from the overload finally spilling over, hot tears streaking down her flushed cheeks, her voice cracking into jagged sobs.



"I can't shake your stare... li—like I was... Shit... Everything I had to do... swallowing your cum, fuck, it's too much... It's so fucking gross, I can't wipe it away!"

Alan freaked, his face draining pale under the harsh lamp glow, and shot back with a voice climbing sharp, a blend of defense and budding anger.

"I didn't even want to go, damn it! I tried talking you out of it, over and over, telling you not to! But you wouldn't listen, you were fixated on that cash!"

That's when his temper really ignited, hitting him right then that if she hadn't pushed, hadn't insisted, they'd have dodged this nightmare; fired up, he layered it on, words flying like barbs.

"And you're the one who made me swear it wouldn't change a thing between us! Are you kidding me? I didn't ask for any of this, shit! Besides, you were eyeing me weird too! Y—you… you weren't the only one caught in that mess, I saw you getting wet when—"

A gasp slipped from Madison, a choked sound of shock, humiliated, gutted to her core—it was too much, that jab slicing through her like a blade, dragging everything back up, her body selling her out despite herself.



"Get out of here!"

Alan froze, clocking what he'd just let fly, the words hanging toxic in the air, and tried to backpedal, voice shaky.

"No, wait, I—I mean…"

"Get the fuck out of here!"

He stood up sheepish, shoulders slumped, still simmering with resentment deep down, knowing she was way out of line, shutting out his side of the hurt, but she wouldn't hear it; to keep from making it worse, he complied, crossing the room quietly, leaving his half-drunk tea on the table, and slipped out, the door clicking shut behind him with a final snap that echoed through the stifling quiet.