The Offer

Chapter 21

Five minutes had slipped by, maybe six, in a silence broken only by the distant tick of a cheap clock scraping at the edges. Madison sat at the tiny kitchenette table, her hands wrapped tight around a steaming mug of tea she hadn't touched. Her reddened eyes stared into the amber liquid without really seeing it; fresh tears quivered on her lashes, ready to spill with the slightest blink.



She sniffled softly—a tiny, almost childlike sound that twisted something deep in Alan's chest. Across from her, he stayed frozen, elbows on the table, fingers clenched together. His ploy had worked. Too well. Way too well.

He'd watched her crumble, bolt in here sobbing, beg him not to do "something stupid." And now, facing this big sister he'd always known as strong and independent, reduced to a little girl crying into her tea, he felt… moved. Deeply.

"Alan…" she murmured at last, her voice cracked, barely audible.

"I've been a shitty big sister… Fuck, I'm awful. I focused everything on me, on what I was

feeling, like you were just… the villain in the story. I didn't think about you for a second. Not really. I've been crap, Alan. Total crap."

Her voice shattered on the last word. She dropped her head, shoulders shaking with a silent sob, tears finally splashing into the tea one by one—tiny, soundless bursts on the surface. Alan felt his own shame coil tight in his gut. He drew a deep breath, searching for a way out.

"Madi… listen. You want to… stick around a bit? I can order a pizza if you're hungry. We eat, we talk…"

He hesitated, his voice a little rough.

"…you forgive me?"



Madison lifted her head slowly. Her eyes were swollen, glistening, still brimming with tears she held back with fragile willpower.

She nodded—a tiny, almost invisible motion, as if any bigger gesture might unleash the flood again. So damn sensitive, this one. Way more than he'd imagined. Alan felt a sad, almost tender smile slip out despite himself.

"That's yes to the pizza… or yes to forgiving?"

The silence hung for a second. Then they both burst out laughing at the same time—an absurd, jittery, freeing laugh that shook their shoulders and rattled the mug on the table. A ridiculous, over-the-top laugh that said everything they couldn't put into words: the strain, the guilt, the relief, the sheer insanity of it all. Madison wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, still caught in little hiccups of laughter mixed with leftover sobs.

"Both, asshole… Both."

A little later, the pizza had arrived—a big, steaming margherita plunked down on the table between them like a white flag. Madison was calmer now, tears dried, face still flushed but settled.

Alan felt reassured, and deep down, genuinely glad she'd gotten it. That she was here. That they were… them again.

The meal stayed quiet, though. Madison ate slowly, drained from all the crying, as if the built-up stress from these past days—the video, the fight, the fear, the sleepless nights—had finally crashed out all at once. She was empty. Utterly.

Her shoulders sagged, her movements heavy, and every so often she'd stare at some invisible spot on the table, lost in a haze of exhaustion. Alan watched her from the corner of his eye, his heart squeezed by a guilty tenderness he didn't dare name.

The silence, oddly, wasn't heavy. It was just… there. Like a fragile shell after the storm.



Alan finally broke the silence, his voice low and tentative, like he was dipping a toe into still-rippling waters.

“And your job hunt—any luck with that?”

Madison let out a deep, weary sigh that slipped from her chest like a quiet surrender. She grabbed a slice of lukewarm pizza, biting into it without much gusto, a long string of cheese stretching from her lips to the crust before snapping and dripping onto her chin. She chewed slowly, her eyes half-lidded, and mumbled between bites:

“I haven’t really made time for it… Not properly. With everything that’s gone down these last few days, I just… blanked on it.”

Alan nodded, reaching into the fridge for a fresh beer to keep his hands busy, even though his own was still half-full. He sat back down, setting the bottle on the table with a soft clink.

“Yeah, I get it. But maybe… you gotta lower your sights a bit? I mean, you’re zeroed in on gigs in your field, but if it’s urgent, something stopgap to tide you over…”

She shook her head with that stubborn resolve he knew all too well—her face hardening into that unyielding grit, the kind where she’d grip her ideals like they were the only thing keeping her afloat in a sea of bullshit.

“Nah, I’d rather scrape by than get stuck in some soul-sucking crap. I’d even go back to my old firm, those assholes who canned me over some bullshit restructuring. At least there, I was doing something that mattered to me, something with real weight.”

She yawned then, a massive, unstoppable one that stretched her jaw wide, her eyelids drooping like heavy shades. She slumped a little in her chair, her head bobbing faintly, on the verge of dozing right there amid the cooling pizza.

Alan couldn't help but grin, a teasing edge in his voice to cover the lingering unease gnawing at him—that guilty twinge at seeing her so raw, so utterly spent from the mess he'd engineered.



"Hey, Madi, stay with me. You're about to face-plant into the margherita. Keep it up, and I'll snap a pic for Mom."

She laughed weakly, a muffled sound that jostled her shoulders, but she straightened up a bit, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

They finished dinner more quietly after that, nursing their beers in a silence broken by casual chit-chat—first about school, Alan griping about his endless engineering labs, Madison mentioning she had just one year left on her econ master's, a finish line that felt both tantalizingly close and endlessly far.

Then they drifted to the future, almost effortlessly: her dreaming aloud about moving to London, those international finance jobs she pictured there, the rainy streets and cozy pubs pulling her in like a magnet. Alan listened, nodding along, vaguely picturing what it'd be like with her so far away, their connection stretched thin across oceans and time zones.

They didn't mention Beca once. Not their escapades, the sleepless nights, or the chasm that had ripped open between them.

It was an unspoken pact: bury it for tonight, at least, in this shaky bubble they were piecing back together, bite by bite.

Eventually, it got late. The pizza was reduced to an empty, greasy box on the table, the beers ditched with their twisted caps.

Madison stood up unsteadily, her legs like dead weight, shuffling toward the door with wobbly steps.

She rummaged in her bag, pulling out her keys that jingled in the quiet, and Alan watched her for a beat before stepping in, a hint of worry threading his voice:



“You good to drive? You look totally wiped.”

She froze, shoulders slumping, not even bothering to fake it—she was bone-tired, all these events had drained her to the core, like her body had finally buckled after holding out too long.

“Not really… I can’t see myself behind the wheel like this. Feels like my eyelids are welded shut.”

Alan snagged his hoodie from the back of a chair, slipping it on smoothly.

“Okay, I’ll drive you home then. It’s not far, and—”

But Madison cut him off, her voice thick and sluggish, like every word was a slog:

“And how’re you getting back after?”

He shrugged, flashing a reassuring smile.

“Don’t sweat it, it’s a quick walk. Or I’ll drop your car back tomorrow morning if I take it. No big deal.”

She furrowed her brow, her foggy brain struggling to catch up, making him repeat it twice—”Huh? What, on foot?”—as if the pieces weren’t clicking in her worn-out mind. All she wanted was sleep, to collapse somewhere and let the darkness swallow her whole.

Her gaze drifted to the couch behind her, worn but welcoming in the dim lamplight.

“Hey, worst case… can I crash here? Your couch works fine…”

she said, yawning so wide it nearly knocked her off balance, a contagious one that left her swaying.

Alan blinked, caught off guard by the out-of-the-blue suggestion. Madison, still wobbling on her feet, stared at the couch with a worn-out resolve, her heavy lids betraying an exhaustion that ran deeper than just a boozy night—it was the full crush of these past days bearing down, those sleepless hours plagued by flashing images, the gnawing guilt, that warped brother-sister bond they’d brushed against with no way back.



“Madi… in ten minutes, you’d be home if you want,”

he said at last, his tone gentle but wavering, like he was still trying to talk her into it—or talk himself into believing it was the smart move, the one that sidestepped any extra mess in a night already loaded with too much. But she’d already ditched the idea, shaking her head with a feeble flick, almost kid-like in its utter weariness.

“Nah, I’ll head out early tomorrow, promise. Don’t want to impose more than I have to…”

She waved her hand in a loose swirl, slicing through the air like she was swatting at some phantom bug, then added in a slurred mumble:

“I’m seriously wiped, Alan. Like, dead on my feet.”

Thrown for a loop, he nodded in agreement.

Since he’d moved into this cramped but all-his-own apartment, neither of them had ever crashed at the other’s place—they lived close enough, after all, and the chance just hadn’t come up.

He cleared his throat and offered, out of sheer politeness, a touch of chivalry creeping in despite everything:

“At least take my room. I’ll crash on the couch, no problem.”



Madison had already flopped onto said couch like a sack of bricks, the cushions sinking under her with a weary groan of faded fabric.

“No need, really. I’m good here.”

He shook his head, firmer now, a surge of brotherly protectiveness kicking in—that instinct to look out for her, even in the little stuff.

“Either you take the bed, or I drive you home. Pick one.”

She lifted her head, a bit awkward, her cheeks tinting pink under the soft lamplight, and tossed out a joke to lighten the vibe:

“Not if it’s a total dump, right…”

Alan laughed, a short but real burst that cut through the awkwardness.

“Ha, hilarious… And yeah, it bugs me to stick someone on this beat-up old couch. It’s seen better days.”

Madison mulled it over for a second, eyes half-shut, gnawing at her bottom lip like she always did when weighing pros and cons—and in that hanging quiet, Alan felt a faint ripple of surprise hit him, nothing major, just the oddness of the moment settling in. She nodded at last, giving in with a sigh.

“Okay, okay… I’ll bounce early, promise.”

He guided her to the bedroom with an easy motion, flicking on the light with a click that bathed the room in a warm glow—thankfully, it was decently tidy, books stacked on the desk, bed sorta made, no embarrassing clutter. He rubbed the back of his neck, a little self-conscious anyway, muttering:

“I changed the sheets not too long ago… Uh, or just sleep on top if you want, whatever works…”



Madison chuckled softly, the sound muffled by another jaw-cracking yawn, and she collapsed onto the bed facedown, her face buried in the pillow that carried a faint whiff of his shampoo. She mumbled through the fabric, her voice dull but easygoing:

“I don’t care…”

Alan felt a wave of relief roll through him, laced with a soft amusement at the sight of her like this—raw, drained, but safe here, with him. It cracked him up, this unexpected slice of domestic normalcy after all the turmoil.

He eased the door shut behind him with a gentle click, whispering a “Good night, Madi” that lingered in the air before fading out like a snuffed flame.

Alan stood frozen for a beat in the dim hallway, his hand still lingering on the doorknob he’d just eased shut. Then a quiet chuckle slipped out, muffled as he pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, the sheer ridiculousness of it all crashing over him like a rogue wave. Madison was crashing in his room, after all the effort he’d poured into luring her here, twisting her arm with that desperate message. It was insane. Weird too, this

sudden closeness invading his space, but deep down, it settled him—like some unseen knot loosening, giving way to a simple warmth, almost soothing.

He shook his head to clear the haze and headed to the tiny bathroom to brush his teeth, his worn-out reflection in the mirror tossing back a crooked grin he couldn't quite pin down. Done, he wandered back to the living room, already sensing sleep wouldn't come easy—too much leftover buzz in his veins, too many thoughts churning on repeat. He flicked on the TV out of habit, flipping through late-night reruns, and dialed down the volume without thinking, realizing it was odd to worry about noise in his own place, like her being there turned it into something communal, more mindful.

A few minutes later, a soft click caught his ear—a door opening, then another quieter one. Madison hitting the bathroom, no doubt. He cranked the TV up a notch on purpose, just enough to grant some privacy, drowning out those everyday sounds that could feel awkward in the dead of night.



Then her head poked through the bedroom door crack, looking a bit sheepish even half-asleep, hair tousled and eyes squinting against the screen's blue glow.

She murmured shyly:

“Hey, can you look away for a sec?”

Alan didn’t catch on right away, furrowing his brow in the shadows.

“Huh? Why?”

Madison didn’t mince words, her voice thick with fatigue:

“Uh, it’s super stuffy in your room… I’m just grabbing a glass of water.”

He shrugged, still not fully tracking, and replied casually:

“Well, go for it—help yourself in the kitchenette. It’s right there.”

She let out a tired, slightly annoyed sigh before dropping:

“I’m in my panties…”

Alan snorted a low laugh, holding it back to keep the quiet intact, slapping a dramatic hand over his eyes.

“OK, OK…”

A moment later, he heard her light footsteps padding across the floor, tentative on the wood, then the steady trickle of water from the faucet.



Without much thought, no real motive, he stole a quick glance by instinct—catching her back to him in the kitchenette, just in her underwear, a hazy outline in the half-light—but he jerked his gaze away fast, a little thrown by his own impulse, fixing back on the screen where a silent ad scrolled by.

She wrapped up, the glass clinking softly in the sink, and tossed over her shoulder before heading back, her tone still drowsy:

“By the way, I snagged one of your t-shirts…”

Alan chuckled softly, dropping his hand.

“OK, no problem.”

No real tension hanging in the air—odd, sure, this fatigue-fueled intimacy, but it felt wholesome, almost effortless given the circumstances. Madison mumbled a goodnight and shuffled back to the room, the door clicking shut behind her with finality. Alan laughed to himself a bit, sinking deeper into the couch, thinking yeah, this was good—finally feeling settled, like this surprise night was tying off the loose ends from the mess of the past few days.

Later that night, Alan jolted awake, nearly tumbling off the couch in the pitch-black room, his legs pins-and-needles numb and his mind thick with fog. For a split second, he wondered what the hell he was doing there—must’ve dozed off in front of the TV, the screen long gone dark, draping the space in inky softness.

He hauled himself up to take a piss, weaving unsteadily down the hall with his eyes barely cracked open, then automatically headed for his bedroom, not really registering the closed door as habit kicked in hard.

He pushed inside without a second thought, flopping down like it was nothing, the mattress dipping under him with that well-worn give.