# The Offer

## Chapter 3

The shrill *driiing* of the doorbell sliced straight through the cottony fog of Alan's apartment. He groaned, eyelids heavy with sleep and regret, his body rebelling against the dull grey light leaking through the half-drawn curtains. His skull pounded like a construction site in full chaos—thank you, Dylan's party, with its lukewarm beers and those damn shots that went down like water.

"I'm coming! Jesus, I'm coming!" he barked hoarsely, stumbling out of his wrecked bed, bare feet smacking against the cold floorboards. He grabbed a crumpled T-shirt from the floor, pulled it on inside out without noticing, and dragged himself to the door, one hand pressed to his temple as if he could cage the drum threatening to burst out of his skull.



He fumbled with the lock, and the door swung open to reveal Madison leaning against the frame, a steaming coffee in hand and a crooked smile that screamed *I told you so*. She wore faded skinny jeans, an oversized sweater, and her hair was tied in a messy bun already losing the battle against rebellious strands.



Behind her, the campus street yawned with the slow, lazy hum of a Sunday morning: bikes rolling over damp cobblestones, the smell of rotting leaves mixed with the wet asphalt after a night's rain.

"Wow. You look like a zombie that got flattened by a truck," she said, stepping inside without waiting to be invited, dodging the shoes littering the narrow entrance.

Alan blinked, his fogged-up brain trying to put the pieces together: Madison. Sunday. Weekend at their parents'. Shit.

"Madi? Oh fuck, I totally spaced. Sorry, I was... yeah, I completely forgot to set an alarm." He shut the door with a push of his hip and scrubbed his face as if he could wipe away the dark circles betraying him.

The apartment was its usual brand of chaos: a stack of engineering books on the coffee table, a cold pizza still in its open box on the kitchenette counter, and his laptop screen blinking with an unfinished Excel file.

"It's stupid early, isn't it? What time were we supposed to leave again?"

Madison set her coffee down on the table with theatrical flair, her gaze sweeping over the room with a mix of amusement and mild judgment.



"It's ten, you sloth. We were supposed to be on the road at nine, remember? To avoid traffic. If we're late, mom's gonna give us her classic punctuality sermon. Now move your ass, I'm not waiting all day."

She dropped onto the beat-up couch, crossing her legs like a queen forced into exile.

"And take a shower. You smell like last night."

He rolled his eyes, though a traitorous smile was already pushing through his three-day stubble.

"You came to ruin my life or what?" he grumbled, heading toward the tiny bathroom and shutting the door—though not loud enough to cover the sudden hiss of the shower, followed by a muffled curse when the cold water slapped him awake.

Ten minutes later, he emerged with hair still dripping, a towel around his neck, and a clean pair of jeans thrown on in a hurry. Madison hadn't moved, except now the TV was on, showing a muted football replay, volume low to spare his throbbing head.

"So? Are we going? I've been waiting an hour already!"

She raised a brow, sipping her coffee with calculated slowness.

"Very funny... Good thing I'm here to drag you out of bed, because if I had drunk as much as you last night..."

She let the sentence trail off, a shared glint in her eyes—but with a faint shadow underneath. The party. The laughter. And that weird moment at the end, that unspoken thing still clinging to them.

Silence settled—brief but heavy, the kind that sucks the air out of a room.

Alan sat across from her on a wobbly stool, grabbed a half-eaten apple from the counter, and bit into it. Madison turned her gaze toward the window, where a fine drizzle had started again, needling the glass and turning the campus outside into a blurred watercolor of soggy lawns and students bundled under hoods.



She was the one who broke the tension, shrugging with exaggerated nonchalance, her voice sliding back into its usual teasing tone.

"You're lucky to have such an amazing big sister. Now finish whatever you're chewing and let's go. I'm not missing mom's cooking because your brain is still mashed potatoes."

Alan snorted, tossing the apple core into the trash with dramatic flair.

"Yeah, yeah. The protective big sister. Without you I'd be lost in the wild, eating chips for breakfast. Thanks, mom number two."

But the joke carried something softer underneath—gratitude, thin but undeniable, a thread still tying them together even when life tried to pull them apart.

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They grabbed their bags—Alan shoving a few clothes into an old duffel that still smelled like a locker room—and headed down the building's creaking stairs. Outside, Madison's beat-up little Ford, the one their uncle had passed down, waited at the curb, its tyres still slick from the night rain. She took the wheel without a word. Alan dropped into the passenger seat with a muffled groan, buckling his belt like a robot.

The engine coughed twice before settling into a low purr, and they rolled through the narrow campus streets, weaving between bikes and puddles reflecting a heavy grey sky.



Silence settled over them, thick as the fog still crawling across the hills. Madison stared straight ahead, her fingers tapping the steering wheel to some imaginary song. Alan rested his head against the window, watching the Victorian buildings slide by—red-brick façades, pubs still shuttered with their signs clacking in the wind, and beyond them, the first hints of open countryside unfolding like an old, yellowed book.

No one dared speak, as if a single word might poke at something too fresh, too raw.

After half an hour, when the air inside the car started to feel heavy enough to chew, Alan reached for the dashboard and twisted the AC knob. A sharp click, a faint hum… then nothing. He frowned and tried again.

"The hell? Is it dead?"

Madison shot him a quick glance, her cheeks colouring slightly.

"Yeah… it died a while ago. Didn't have time to get it fixed—the garage wanted a stupid amount of money, and, well… school and everything."

She shrugged, avoiding his eyes, as if admitting it made her look exposed.

Alan nodded, not pushing it.

"No big deal. I'll just crack the window."



He lowered it a notch, letting in a breath of fresh air thick with the smell of wet soil and autumn leaves. Road noise slipped in too, a steady hum that eased some of the tension.

They drove like that for a while, the landscape rolling past in shades of green and brown: neat hedgerows lining the fields, sheep staring blankly through the drizzle, the first villages with their thatched-roof cottages.

To fill the silence, Alan said in a flat voice,

"Bet you anything Mum's making her famous pie. The one where the carrots swim in gravy from dawn. She's probably been stressing about it since six this morning."

That drew a faint smile from Madison, her shoulders loosening just a bit.

"Yeah, and Dad's gonna give us his 'it's your grandmother's recipe' speech—like we haven't heard it a thousand times."

She let out a small laugh, soft but warm, cutting through the stuffy air.

"At least we know we'll eat real food. Not like your microwave-resurrected pizzas."

They kept going like that, skimming over their parents without digging deeper: Dad and his gardening obsession, Mum and her endless shopping lists. Miles slipped by, the road opening ahead in a straight, monotonous stretch lined with service stations and signs for towns nobody remembers.

Silence returned in waves, but it was softer now, broken up by the little jabs and jokes that worked like a secret handshake between them.

After two hours, already nearing the North, Alan's phone buzzed in his pocket with a quiet *bip*. He pulled it out without thinking, frowning at the screen as it lit up. His expression shifted—something caught between surprise and discomfort—which didn't escape Madison.

"What's with your face? You look like you've seen a ghost," she said, glancing at him while overtaking a truck belching black smoke.



Alan hesitated, thumb hovering above the screen. Then he cleared his throat and read, voice neutral, as if the words were in another language:

"'Hey… it's Rebecah. I'm really sorry about last night. I drank too much and I'm mortified 😅. You two are lovely, I kinda lost control.'"

"Fuck," Madison muttered, tightening her grip on the wheel.

"That girl from last night? *That* Rebecah?"

She pronounced the name with surgical precision, like she'd carved it into her memory.

He nodded, eyes glued to the phone.

"Yeah. That's her."

"And why do you have her number?" she shot back—sharper than she meant to—her gaze flicking between the road and her brother.

Alan shrugged, feigning unconcern.

"I dunno. We must've swapped numbers at some point. Beer pong, shots... everything's a blur."

Madison exhaled sharply, lips pinched.

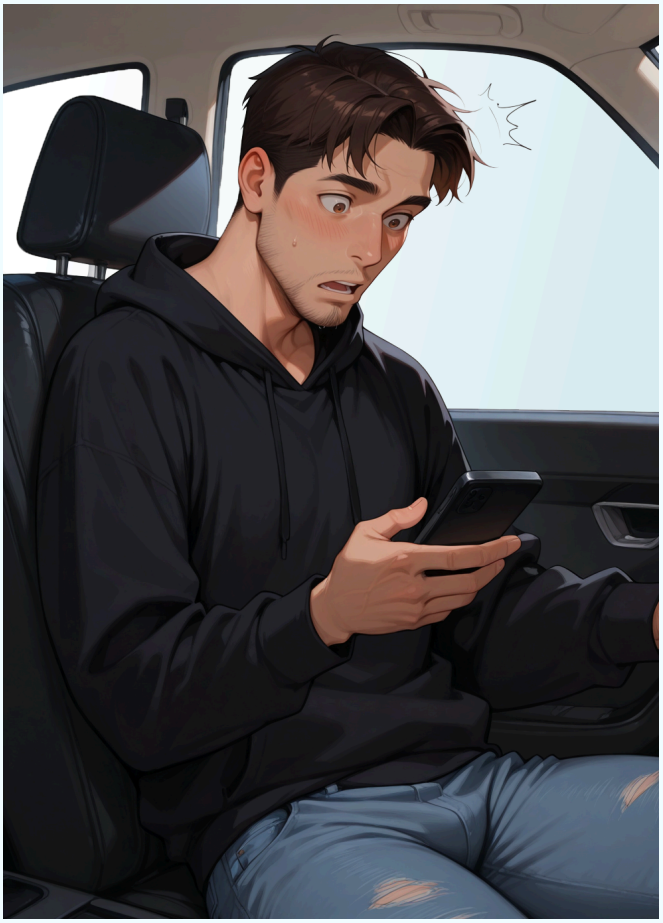
"Ignore her. Delete the message and block her. Last thing we need is to dig that shit back up."

But Alan, after barely a second of hesitation, was already typing a reply:

"'Don't worry, we were all wasted 😅'"

He sent it before he'd even fully thought it through, the confirmation *bip* echoing in the car like a confession.

Almost immediately, the phone buzzed again.



Alan read silently, then aloud:

"'You two coming to the campus bar tonight? Let me buy you a drink to make up for it.'"

He started typing—"'We're at our parents' this weekend'"—but Madison, catching the motion from the corner of her eye, braked a bit too abruptly approaching a roundabout.

"Wait. You're texting her back? Seriously, Alan? Stop it. Right now."

He lifted both hands in surrender and slipped the phone into his pocket with a long sigh.

"Okay, okay, I'm done. Dropping it. Happy?"

Silence resurfaced—heavier this time—stretching ahead of them like a faint boundary line drawn right across the road.

They drove for another hour, the silence broken only by scraps of a local radio station sputtering out half-forgotten hits from the eighties—just enough noise to stitch over the gaps without pushing them to talk. The countryside began to flatten out, the rolling hills giving way to the industrial north: rust-stained factories, tight clusters of stone-grey churches, and villages huddled around them like they were trying to stay warm.

Their hometown—a small coastal place in Lancashire—finally appeared at the end of a slip road: narrow terraced streets lined with red-brick houses, pubs whose paint had been eaten away by sea salt, and beyond them the Irish Sea melting into a blurry horizon.

It wasn't a glamorous place. Never had been. It was built by fishermen and factory workers, soaked in salt and stubbornness, the air always carrying a sharp tang of iodine and fresh catch even in autumn. Nothing fancy—just a weather-beaten kind of strength. The harbour dozed under the fine drizzle, gulls circling like hungry ghosts.

The car pulled up in front of the family home, a small two-storey wedged between two identical ones, its tiny garden stubbornly filled with the roses their dad kept trying to grow despite the sea wind chewing them to pieces. The front door swung open before they'd even killed the engine: their mother, Eileen, appeared in the doorway, dish towel in hand and a smile that erased the tired creases around her eyes.

She'd been teaching at the local primary school for twenty years—wrangling kids with endless patience, often coming home with badly drawn pictures stuck to her sleeves.

"Finally! I thought you'd taken the scenic route," she teased, hugging them one by one, her embrace smelling of strong tea and pastry dough.

Inside, the familiar smell hit them instantly: clean laundry mixed with something simmering on the stove. Their father sat in the cramped living room, newspaper spread across his knees, his calloused hands—leftovers from his years on trawlers before arthritis forced him to quit—turning the pages with slow precision.

He had beaten prostate cancer two years earlier, a quiet battle of chemo, hospital visits and gritted teeth, like riding out a storm at sea.

"Hello, you two," he grunted with a wink, standing to give Alan a back-slap and Madison a kiss on the cheek. "Road wasn't too rough, I hope?"

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Lunch stretched out around the worn formica table, plates heaped with Eileen's beef-and-onion pie—slow-cooked until the meat fell apart the second a fork touched it. Laughter came easily: Frank told a story about an old fishing mate who once mistook a seal for a shark, Alan mimicked his stuttering mechanics professor, and Madison described a seminar on emerging markets where a student confused Bitcoin with a biscuit brand.

Money had always been her thing, even as a kid—counting coins in her piggy bank, haggling at the Saturday market for fun.

"It's genuinely fascinating," she said between bites, eyes bright. "I spend all day analysing financial flows—it feels like decoding the world."

Alan just shrugged with a crooked smile. Engineering was more of a steady habit than a burning passion for him—structural calculations that kept his feet on the ground without ever lighting a fire in him.



Their parents asked the usual questions about classes. Eileen fretted over study hours, Frank nodding silently.

"And if you need anything—money for books, or to fix that AC that clicks?" she offered, though her tone betrayed the truth: they didn't have much to give. Their life ran on careful budgeting, everything funnelled into the kids, savings scraped together to cover uni fees without sinking them.

"We’re fine, Mum," Madison said firmly.

"Yeah, all good," Alan added.

They both knew how much every penny mattered in this house, where the furniture came from boot sales and holidays meant picnics on the nearby beach.

The day drifted by peacefully—a little bubble of normal life. After lunch, they walked through the coastal park, wind stinging their cheeks, Frank pointing out a boat far offshore and telling old sea stories with a soft hint of longing. Eileen collected seashells for her growing stash, and laughter sprang up over childhood memories—like the time Alan tried to fish with a homemade rod and ended up falling straight into the water.

They were a close family. Not gushy or dramatic—just tightly woven, warm in that steady way that held up even under the drizzle.

As usual, they stayed the night: Alan in his old room, still plastered with yellowed football posters and shelves full of model bridges he’d built as a teenager; Madison in hers, surrounded by stacked economics books and an old chalkboard covered in equations she used to scribble for fun.

The weekend slipped past in a blink—endless cups of tea, card games where Frank cheated shamelessly.

The next morning, breakfast tasted like ritual: scrambled eggs, buttered toast, and Eileen pouring tea with eyes already shining.

"You’re leaving already? Stay for lunch at least," she pleaded, but they shook their heads—classes started Monday.

She hugged them tightly on the doorstep. Frank slipped a crumpled banknote into Alan’s hand"for petrol" before they climbed back into the car. Madison took the wheel again, the Ford coughing its way down the road, the sky lightening as they drove south.

On the motorway, they chatted without pushing, relieved their parents seemed well.

"Dad’s looking good, right? Didn’t complain about his joints once," Alan noted.



Madison laughed. "And Mum with her monster-drawing pupils—she loves those kids, even when she moans about them."

They joked about the food.

"Next time we bring extra salt," Alan said.

"And label it ‘For Mum’s cooking only’," Madison added.

It was their thing—these light, easy exchanges, their relationship running smooth as a well-oiled machine, never bogged down by pointless drama.

Then, somewhere along a long straight stretch of road, Alan’s phone buzzed again in his pocket.

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Alan pulled his phone from his pocket, squinting as the screen lit up in the low afternoon sun.

Rebecah’s message flashed there—clear, insistent:

“Are you back on campus tonight? Are you home already? I really want to make things right 🥲”

“Christ…” Alan muttered, the word slipping out instinctively as his thumb froze above the keyboard. He glanced sideways at Madison, who was driving with steady hands, eyes locked on the endless straight line of motorway ahead.

“What now?” she asked without looking at him, catching the tension in the air like the smell of something burning.

“It’s her. Rebecah. She sent another message.”

He read it aloud, flatly, as if neutral delivery might defuse it:

“‘Are you on campus tonight? Are you home already? I really want to make things right.’ With a sad emoji.”

Madison pressed her lips together, her knuckles whitening on the wheel.

“I don’t wanna see that girl again. Seriously, Alan—delete and block. Not our problem.”

He didn’t answer immediately. He just slipped his phone onto his lap, letting the silence stretch out, filled only by the hum of the engine and the hiss of wind sneaking through the cracked window. Then, in a careful tone—as if dipping a toe into cold water:

“She wasn’t that bad before everything went sideways, right? The jokes, the beer pong—she nailed every shot. It felt easy.”

Madison nodded despite herself, a ghost of a smile tugging at her mouth.

“Yeah… she blended in fast. Like she’d always been part of the group. And then boom—she flipped. Ruined the whole vibe.”

“Exactly.” Alan stared ahead, watching the asphalt spool out in front of them.

“But maybe she actually wants to apologise. Be polite about it, we could stop by for two minutes, have a drink, and bail. Just so it doesn’t hang over us like unfinished business.”

Madison frowned and sent him a quick sideways glance, something curious flickering beneath her irritation. The weirdness of that night had left a loose thread—one she clearly hadn’t stopped tugging at.

“Two minutes. No more. And if she starts her crap again, I’m out.”

Alan nodded, a faint grin slipping out, and typed a short reply before pocketing his phone.



The silence that followed wasn't the same—it buzzed with something new, nudging them to finally open the door they'd been avoiding.

Madison broke it first.

"God, that night… she actually had us laughing before everything derailed."

"Yeah," Alan admitted, stretching his legs in the cramped footwell.

"It was all smooth until it turned creepy. The way she kept pushing, offering cash on top… Like, what the fuck was that about?"

They both burst into a sudden, nervous laugh—shaking off the leftover tension just by naming it.

"I swear, I didn't see it coming," Madison went on.

"There was something in her tone… like this weird, nosy fascination. And when she found out about us…"

Alan shook his head, laughing for real now.

"She didn't catch your eye at least?" she teased, elbowing him lightly without taking her eyes off the road.

"What? No, she's way too unhinged for that," he said, pretending to be offended before snorting.

"But, okay, yeah—she's hot. That smile, those eyes… Doesn't fix the rest, though."

Madison nodded with a breathy laugh.

“Super hot, yeah. But nuts. Money messes with your brain—did you see her life? Hopping country to country without a real job… That’ll disconnect you from reality fast.”

They cracked up again, the laughter bouncing around the car like a pressure valve releasing.



The topic burned out naturally, drifting toward lighter waters: classes starting tomorrow, that econ professor who couldn’t organise his slides, Alan whining about his materials lab project that would probably keep him locked in until midnight.

They talked about everything and nothing—some history podcast they’d listened to, a failed attempt at baking scones, the weekend derby that had turned into a disaster—miles slipping by without them noticing.

Almost forgetting they were supposed to see her again that very night.