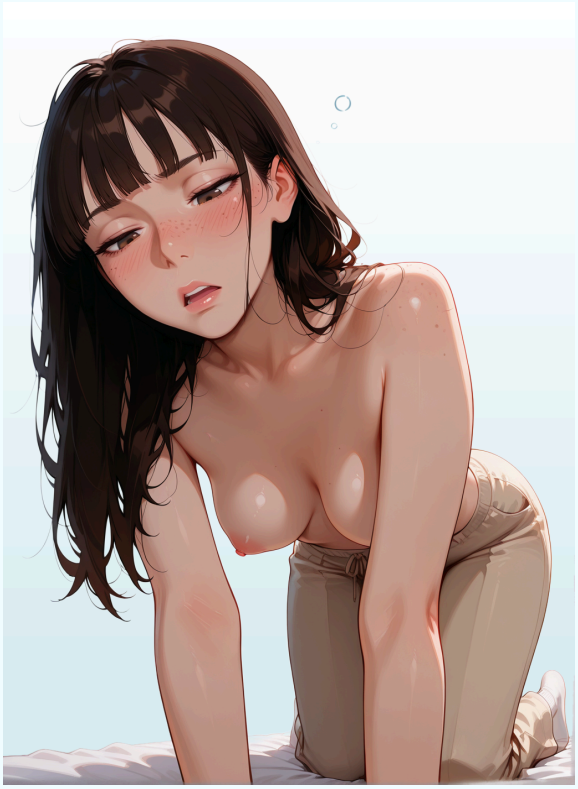
The Offer

Chapter 31



Madison woke with a hangover that clamped down on her skull like a rusted vise. Pale, merciless morning light leaked through the half-drawn curtains and stabbed straight through her eyelids. She lay there a long moment, body leaden, mouth thick and sour, every cell screaming at the thought of movement. A raw, scorching thirst gripped her throat, sharper than the nausea twisting her gut.

Finally she pushed herself upright with a low, guttural groan, the sweat-soaked sheets peeling away from her bare skin.
Her legs shook as her feet hit the floor.
She staggered across the room, steadying herself against the wall, one careful step after another, like a patient relearning how to walk.

In the cramped bathroom she clutched the sink and cranked the faucet wide open. Cold water burst out, bright and fierce.

She bent low, drinking straight from the stream, swallowing greedily, letting it spill down her chin, over her throat, splashing across the tiles. When she straightened, her reflection slammed into her.

She froze.

The memories hit all at once—violent, jagged, like a reel spinning backward too fast. The bar. The fake laughter with the girls from her program. The drinks stacking up, the beers blurring into one another. And then… Alan.

Everything that had been sitting heavy in her stomach since she opened her eyes detonated. Nausea surged, sharper, more real. She braced both hands on the sink, knuckles bone-white, legs turning to water. No. Not that. The fragments sharpened with every heartbeat: her body pressed against his, his hands roaming, the heat, the words tumbling out unchecked, the couch… her mouth on him. Every single detail rushed back, cruelly clear, damning.

She nearly collapsed. Her knees buckled; she caught herself on the edge of the sink, breath locked in her throat. A scream clawed its way up, trapped between the hangover pounding her temples and the memories ripping through her skull. Anything but this. Not him. Not her brother.



In the worst possible second—while one last fragile bubble still floated, the one where this could still be nothing more than a drunken nightmare, a grotesque hallucination—a soft cough drifted in from the living room.

As if to announce himself.

Alan was still there. In her goddamn living room. And he knew she was awake.

Madison's heart slammed against her ribs. She bolted back into the bedroom on unsteady legs, shutting the door behind her without a sound. Half-naked, she snatched the first thing she saw—a loose, crumpled T-shirt draped over a chair—and yanked it over her head, the fabric sliding cold against her still-damp skin.

She was still wearing yesterday's jeans; she hadn't even bothered to take them off. She shot a panicked glance at the alarm clock. Still early. Class in a few hours. None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was getting past that door.

She dropped onto the edge of the bed, fingers digging into her thighs, breath shallow and fast. She didn't make a sound. Inside her head everything spun at breakneck speed—calculations, panic, desperate plans. She had no idea what to do. Part of her still prayed he would just stand up, leave, that every faint creak of the couch she heard would be the last, that he would walk out without a word. But he didn't. He stayed right there, inches away on the other side of the wall, and he wasn't moving.

She waited. Five minutes that felt like forever. Each second stretched the silence tighter, heavier, more unbearable.

Madison finally gave in. She pushed herself up, legs unsteady, the floor tilting beneath her bare feet. Every step felt like a battle, as if her body still refused to accept the reality waiting for her on the other side of that door. She laid her hand on the knob, hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then turned it and stepped into the tiny living room.

Alan was there.

He sat on the couch, elbows planted on his knees, head buried in his hands. He didn't move. He didn't look at her. Not a single word. Just his hunched silhouette, motionless, as if the weight of the night before had nailed him in place. The silence was so thick it felt almost solid, a heavy substance that clung to the skin.

Madison stood frozen in the doorway, heart hammering so hard she could hear it thudding in her temples. The knot that had been twisting in her stomach since she woke tightened another notch. She broke the silence first, her voice hoarse, edged with the irritation of a discomfort that made her want to scream.

“Tell me it’s not true… it wasn’t a dream?”



Alan lifted his head slowly. Their eyes met at last. His were sad, a little ashamed, lids heavy. He didn’t need to speak. He didn’t need to nod. She understood. Instantly. As if the air between them had hardened around that brutal truth. Even if she still couldn’t fully grasp the sheer size of what it meant.

Leaning against the wall, unable to take another step, Madison felt her legs start to shake. Her voice came out weaker than she wanted.

“Alan… what the hell are you… doing here…”

He answered right away, awkward, the words tumbling out like he was scrambling for an excuse.

“You were completely wasted… I didn’t want to risk you puking all over yourself while you slept or something…”

Then nothing. The silence dropped back down, heavy, suffocating. He added, almost to himself:

“I just crashed on your couch… I must’ve passed out, I…”

He stood up then, clumsy, avoiding her eyes. He looked at her one last time, straight in the face, just for a second, before dropping his gaze.

“I should go…”

Madison cut him off, her voice cracking, almost pleading.

“It really happened…?”



Alan stopped dead, stunned. He stood there frozen, mouth half-open, searching for words.

“Uh… I mean…”

He was already turning toward the door when, out of nowhere, she blurted:

“You… you want a coffee?”

She surprised herself with the offer. The words had left her lips before her brain could stop them. Alan gave her a strange look, trying to read whether she was serious or if this was just a polite way of telling him to fuck off. Another thick silence settled between them, heavy, almost tangible. Finally he answered, a little more direct this time, his voice rough.

“Okay.”

Madison moved toward the kitchenette with mechanical steps, still numb from the hangover and the invisible weight pressing down on every movement. She started the coffee maker, the sound of water filling the reservoir echoing too loudly in the apartment’s oppressive silence. Behind her, Alan had taken a seat at the small round table, elbows planted on the worn wood, hands clasped in front of his mouth. He said nothing. He barely moved.

Inside, he was drowning.



Why the fuck did I stay? The question looped endlessly in his head, acidic, twisting in his guts. He hated himself for giving in to that protective impulse the night before—seeing her so drunk, so vulnerable, he hadn’t had the heart to leave her alone. But now? Now he was here, in her living room, with the memory of what had happened between them clinging to his skin like a second layer of shame. Did she remember everything? The way she’d pressed herself against him, her hands searching, her mouth…? Or only blurry fragments? He didn’t even dare imagine what she must think of him right now.

He stared at the table without seeing it, heart thudding dully. Neither of them dared speak. The silence was so thick it felt almost tangible, a heavy presence that filled every inch of space between them.



While the coffee brewed, Madison grabbed her phone from the counter. She scrolled through her notifications mechanically, more to keep her trembling hands busy than out of any real interest. The messages blurred past. She felt painfully awkward, back rigid, painfully aware that every second of this silence brought them closer to the moment they'd actually have to face what had happened.

The coffee finished dripping. She poured two steaming mugs, fingers clenched tight around the handles, and carried them back to the table. Without a word, she set one down in front of Alan. Then, as if she could no longer stand the emptiness, she held her phone out to him, screen lit on a specific message.

"What the hell did you have to tell me that was so important?"

It was the text he had sent her the night before—the urgent message saying he needed to talk to her about Rebecah, about everything that had happened in the last few days.

Alan looked up, startled. For a split second, he had completely forgotten. Time had felt suspended since he woke up on that couch, and this brutal reminder hit him square in the chest. He looked at her, embarrassed, sizing her up, holding her gaze a little longer this time. Their eyes locked, heavy, loaded with everything they still hadn't said.

Alan let out a nervous, broken laugh.

"Fuck..."

He hesitated, words stuck in his throat. Madison, sensing he was trying to dodge, pressed him, her voice low but firm, as if refusing to let this other burning subject die:

“It’s about Rebecah, then…?”



Alan looked defeated, his shoulders slumping slightly. He dropped his eyes to his steaming mug for a second, then suddenly, as if the words had been festering too long, he blurted:

“Beca’s been manipulating me for the past few… weeks…”

Madison froze, shocked.

“What?”

Her voice came out sharper than she intended.

She caught herself immediately, the tone rising despite herself before dropping again, embarrassed.

“Huh? What do you mean, manipulating? What the hell are you talking about!?”

Alan looked at her. He had been eager to tell her, to lance the boil, to finally spill everything… but here, in this tiny kitchen, with what had happened last night still hanging between them like a living shadow, it suddenly didn’t feel as important. It didn’t feel as urgent.

“Shit… I’m sorry. I… I didn’t want to drop it like this… and now…”

Still, he pushed forward. He started explaining everything that had happened.



Madison spoke in a low voice, almost mechanical at first, unloading the last few weeks like emptying an overstuffed sack that had grown far too heavy: the video Rebecah had kept like a blade pressed to their throats, the precise threats, the orders she issued by text or in person, the blackmail that had forced him to play the perverted brother—to touch her right in front of her, to make Madison believe he was obsessed, to sow that sick tension between them just to feed Rebecah's twisted little game.

He told her about the party, the calculated strokes along her thigh, the confessions he'd been forced to drag out of himself in the bedroom, how Rebecah had had him by the balls from the very beginning. He laid it all out, raw and unadorned, without excuses—just the facts, in strict chronological order, each word tearing another piece out of him.

Madison sat across from him, fingers white-knuckled around her mug as the coffee slowly went cold. She was trembling. Not violent spasms, but a deep, constant shiver that started in her shoulders and traveled all the way down to her fingertips. Too much information. Too many pieces slamming together at once, too fast—like forcing a puzzle

in the wrong direction. Her eyes were wide, unfocused, lost somewhere between the table and Alan's face.



"Why the fuck didn't you tell me sooner!!!"

The cry ripped through the small room, hoarse and almost feral. It bounced off the narrow walls, vibrating the air between them. Madison had raised her voice without meaning to, her tone fractured by rage and disbelief, before dropping it abruptly, embarrassed, ashamed of letting something so raw burst out of her.

Alan stayed outwardly calm. He didn't move, shoulders slightly hunched, hands still wrapped around his own mug. But she knew him well enough to spot the discomfort he was trying to hide—the tight clench of his jaw, the way his eyes flicked away for a split second before returning to hers. He answered in a steady, almost gentle voice, careful not to add fuel to the fire:

"I didn't have a choice, Madi… She had the video. If I told you anything, she would've sent it everywhere. To our parents, our friends, the whole fucking campus… I couldn't risk that."

Madison was beginning to understand. The pieces clicked together painfully in her mind: Alan's strange looks these past weeks, his overly insistent touches, the forced confessions, that night he had touched her… None of it had really been him. He'd been acting the entire time. Manipulated. Controlled. A puppet with Rebecah pulling every string.

“So… when you…? That night? I…”

The words died in her throat. She couldn’t finish. The puzzle was coming together, last night’s memories crashing into Alan’s revelations, and a fresh wave of nausea surged up her chest, even more violent than before. She was completely stunned, and angry—angry at him, at Rebecah, but mostly at herself for believing it all, for letting that poison settle between them.



Alan continued, seizing the moment before the silence could swallow them again:

“Wait, calm down… That’s not everything. What I wanted to tell you, Madi… I managed to record a confession. Don’t ask me how, but… I have an audio of Rebecah admitting to everything.”

He paused, his voice growing firmer, carrying a hint of relief at finally reaching this part:

“That’s why I can tell you now. We… we can actually do something about it! I—”

But Madison was barely listening. Her eyes were vacant, staring at an invisible point on the table. She was still trembling, fingers locked around her mug. She was slowly realizing that everything she’d put herself through these past weeks—the crushing guilt, the anger at him, the way she’d lost control last night because of the alcohol—it had all been pointless. She had done it… for a lie. A carefully orchestrated manipulation by Rebecah. One she had never seen coming.

Alan watched her, concern etched across his face. His voice softened even further:

“Madison, are you okay?”

She lifted her eyes to meet his. Her gaze was desperate, heartbroken, filled with a pain she couldn’t even name. Tears were already rising, hot and unstoppable.



“I thought… fuck, Alan! I thought…”

Her voice shattered. She tried to push on, the words tumbling out broken and frantic:

“But why didn’t you last night—…”

Alan was caught off guard. He understood immediately what she meant, even though the sentence remained unfinished. Last night. What had happened between them on that couch. The memory now colored by everything he had just revealed.

He asked the question that had been eating at him since earlier, his voice low and cautious:

“Hmm… What exactly do you remember…?”

Madison looked at him, cheeks burning hot and feverish, as if the haze from the night before still refused to let go. Her gaze was sharp, almost accusatory, yet laced with a raw vulnerability she could no longer hide.

“I remember you bringing me home…”

Her voice was hoarse, scraped raw by the alcohol and by everything now flooding back. She looked away, staring at some invisible spot on the table, and the scene slammed into

her again—sharper, crueler with every passing second: her body pressed against his, her hands searching, her mouth…



"Fuck…"

The word slipped out, low and barely audible, like a breath she couldn't hold back.

"W-why… why did you let me do it!"

Alan didn't answer right away. He stayed perfectly still, shoulders slightly hunched, fingers tight around his mug. Then, in a low, embarrassed voice with no trace of anger—just heavy, ashamed exhaustion:

"It's not like I didn't try… more than once. But you were… insistent."

At those last words Madison let out a tiny, involuntary huff of breath. She clapped a hand over her mouth, shocked, as if the simple admission had slapped her across the face again.

Alan took a slow sip of coffee. The silence was absolute. You could almost hear the flies buzzing.

He set the mug down carefully.

"You really remember… everything?"

Madison met his eyes. She seemed to hesitate, lips parted, gaze flicking away for a split second. Finally she answered, her voice a little too flat:

“I remember bits and pieces… but it’s all pretty blurry.”



She was lying.

Alan looked almost relieved. He believed her.

A moment later, as if desperate to change the subject, he murmured:

“About Rebecah, by the way…”

Madison grabbed the lifeline he offered, too grateful for any escape from the other burning topic:

“Yeah, uh… you got a plan?”

The way their eyes kept dodging then seeking each other again made it painfully clear: both of them wanted nothing more than to flee this second scorching subject and shove it as far away as possible.

“I mean… shit, there’s a video, I still can’t wrap my head around it…”

Alan nodded, his voice low and hollow.

“Yeah… a… video…”

The silence fell again, heavier than before. They looked at each other once more, eyes loaded with something impossible to name—a toxic mix of shame, fear, everything that had just shattered, and everything still left unsaid.

“We should probably figure out what to do, right?”

Madison swallowed hard, throat tight.

“Yeah…”