The Offer

Chapter 5

Rebecah couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene, staring as if she were drinking in every tiny shift, every twitch. Madison still had her fingers resting at the base of Alan's neck when she leaned in a little closer, and their lips finally met—a soft, warm, hesitant brush at first, barely a touch, already heavy with the weight of the forbidden.



Then, almost without meaning to, Madison pushed deeper, her mouth parting just enough to catch his in a real kiss—slow, hungry, unflinchingly intimate.

Their eyes shut at the same time, a shared reflex that shut out the world and left only sensation: the humid heat of their mouths pressed together, the faint mix of beer and Coke on their tongues when they brushed, flicked, glided in a brief instinctive dance that shot a jolt straight down both their spines.



Alan's breath hitched against her skin, stumbling into a faster rhythm that synced with hers for just a heartbeat—as if their bodies, familiar since childhood, suddenly recognized something new in this impossible closeness.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, they pulled back from each other, breathing a little too fast, their lips parting with a soft, wet sound. They froze, caught in place, locked in a stare—dilated pupils, shock blooming between them, a cold realization seeping in like a draft.



What the hell had they just done? Time stretched, heavy, until they both jerked their gazes away at the exact same second, mortified, cheeks burning, focusing on anything else—the table, the empty glasses—anything to avoid each other.

Rebecah, meanwhile, was absolutely thrilled—her jaw dropped wide, shock and pure excitement lighting up her face like she'd just witnessed something she was never meant to see.

“Holy shit, I did not expect it to be that hot!” she blurted, breathless, grinning like she was floating.

“I seriously loved every second of that…”

Alan and Madison still couldn’t speak, lips swollen from the kiss, brains stuck in a kind of stunned static.

Rebecah shook her head, still reeling.

“That was insane. Hold on, let me send the rest.” Her fingers flew across her phone, tapping fast—too fast, like someone who clearly had practice. Their phones chimed a moment later: the promised three grand, plus an extra two each. She looked up with a triumphant spark in her eyes.

“I added two thousand each, because… goddamn, that was incredible. You didn’t just play along—you went all in.”

Both of them jumped slightly, startled—seven thousand dollars each, for that?

Madison pushed herself to her feet in a rush, legs unsteady, and Alan followed without a word, grabbing his jacket with a stiff, mechanical gesture. They gave Rebecah a vague little nod, distant and awkward, before turning toward the exit. She tried to stop them with a light, teasing voice: “Hey, wait, we could—”

But they didn’t slow, and she didn’t push, just watched them leave with a crooked smile that hid a flicker of regret.

Still dazed, they reached their car outside—the beat-up Ford that looked even shabbier under the dim parking-lot lights. Seven thousand dollars each, for a kiss—that number sat on them like a too-heavy secret, sinking into their veins with the thick, stormy unease of a summer night about to break.

The ride home settled into silence, thick as the darkness sliding past the windows. The radio crackled faintly—local ads for car insurance—ignored by both. Alan, hands clamped tight on his knees, finally cracked, his voice slicing through the quiet like a rock hitting still water.

“Jesus, that was insane! I mean, seven freaking grand just like that—bam. It’s nuts, right? We could fix the car, or cover rent for months without stressing. Fuck!”



Madison kept her eyes on the road, her grip tightening on the wheel until her knuckles whitened.

“Shut up, Alan. Stop talking about it. Forget the kiss. It’s done. We’re never speaking of it again.”

He blinked, thrown. “What? No—I wasn’t saying the kiss was insane! I mean… it was… I guess… not like that, shit, I meant the money, the whole ridiculous situation—” His words tripped over each other, his face reddening all the way to the ears like his brain was slipping on ice.

“Alan, shut up,” she snapped, cutting him off sharply without looking away from the road.

Silence slammed down again, heavier than before.

When she pulled up in front of his building, the Ford rolled to a slow, quiet stop. He stepped out without another word, shut the door behind him, and she drove off into the night, ending the weekend like someone slamming a book shut mid-sentence.

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The next few days slid by in a strange haze, as if the weekend had left some invisible fingerprint on everything they did. Alan and Madison still crossed paths on campus like always—a quick coffee between classes, a meme or a dumb joke about a boring professor—but something had shifted. Their glances lingered a second too long, their laughs sounded a bit rehearsed, and the silences that used to feel easy now pressed down on them like unspoken confessions.

During lunch with the group, between trays of lukewarm cafeteria food and loud debates about the latest football game, Bella narrowed her eyes at the two of them. She sat across from them with her usual steaming latte, studying them over the rim of her cup.

“Okay, what’s up with you two? You look like someone made you swallow an entire lemon. Was it that weekend at your parents’ place?”



Madison shrugged with a too-bright smile, muttering, “Nah, just burned out from classes,” while Alan shoved a bite of his sandwich into his mouth to avoid answering. Sean and Larry exchanged a knowing glance but didn’t push, drifting back into some half-assed story about last week’s party.

Still, the weirdness clung to them, a tight thread stretched between them that no one else seemed to notice.

Forgetting was impossible, no matter how hard they tried. The dim bar, the forced kiss that hadn’t felt forced at all by the end—it kept flashing back in fragments: a lingering heat on the mouth, a shiver running up the spine at the worst possible moment. And then there was the money—seven thousand dollars each, a sum that flipped their lives inside out in an instant.

Madison, practical as always, had jumped on the opportunity to finally sort out her chaotic life. She'd paid the month of rent she was behind on, sent the advance for the next without hesitation, and even settled the bill for the Ford's repairs—the warning lights that had been screaming for weeks, signaling a dying alternator and worn-out brakes. She got the faulty lock on her apartment door replaced—the one that jammed every time she got home late—and treated herself to a new pair of sneakers, comfortable ones she could actually walk the campus in without wincing.

For the first time in ages, she could breathe: no more sleepless nights juggling bills, no more mental math gymnastics to stretch her budget to the end of the month. It felt like a weight had been lifted, giving her room to focus on her economics classes again, on market analyses she genuinely loved.

And yet she still couldn't wrap her head around how the money had fallen into her life—so fast, so absurdly easy. Seven thousand dollars for a kiss. Rebecah, with her chauffeur and her Sunday spa routine, tossing thousands around like breadcrumbs for pigeons… it was surreal.

Madison tried to shove the thought away, burying herself in revision or scrolling aimlessly through her phone, but it always slipped back in: a notification chime reminding her of the deposit, a glance at her bank balance that made her blush alone in her room.



How did we get here? she wondered, chest tight with a cocktail of gratitude and disgust. She forced herself to rationalize—just a stupid moment, nothing more—but it didn't stick. The unease bled into her dreams, keeping her awake, staring at the ceiling while the whole scene replayed behind her eyelids.

Alan wasn't doing much better, though his reaction had a paranoid edge to it. He kept the money untouched in his PayPal account, not spending a single dollar, as if using it might make it disappear—or worse, make Rebecah show up again, or someone uncover the whole thing and demand it back. He preferred waiting, letting time pass, making sure it was real, that it actually belonged to him.

His engineering days unfolded normally—labs on materials, long hours spent buried in structural calculations—but at night, alone in his cramped apartment, the memory crept back in. That kiss with Madison, that stolen instant when their tongues brushed… It didn't belong in their simple, healthy sibling relationship.

They both tried to pretend nothing had happened—banal texts, stupid jokes when they crossed paths—but something lingered anyway, a quiet awkwardness that made everything feel just a bit too polite, a bit too careful. Like a tiny grain of sand in a shoe—barely noticeable at first, but rubbing raw with every step.

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A few days later, the whole group met up again at a campus bar—a cozy place with exposed brick walls and warm lighting that cast a soft orange glow over the worn wooden tables. It was the kind of classic pub with a row of pint glasses behind the counter and an old-rock playlist humming in the background, loud enough to keep conversations private but never loud enough to drown out laughter.

Alan and Madison sat side by side on a booth, playing it cool, both clinging to the idea that what had happened was nothing—just a stupid dare, a forced kiss they could bury somewhere deep, like an old movie ticket forgotten in a jacket pocket. It didn't matter, they told themselves; life had picked up again, filled with endless lectures and last-minute nights out.

Larry, ever the showman, raised his glass with a dramatic flourish.

“Alright, drinks are on me tonight! Won two hundred bucks playing online poker yesterday. I’m basically loaded now.”

He waved at the bartender for a new round, and the mood lifted instantly. Sean teased Bella about her latest attempt at cooking curry—an experiment that ended in a scorched frying pan—and she shot back by mimicking his nasal voice when he commentated football games. Alan took the chance to poke fun at Madison’s obsession with spreadsheets.



“Are you sure you don’t have a spreadsheet for your dreams, Madi? Like, column A: nightmares, column B: past-due bills?”

She elbowed him sharply, smirking. “At least I can count past ten.”

The banter bounced around the table—easy, familiar—and for a moment everything felt normal again, the unease shoved into a dark corner they both avoided looking at.

Then, in the middle of a burst of laughter, Madison’s phone buzzed insistently against the table, slicing clean through the mood. She glanced at the screen, frowned, and picked up with a neutral “Hello?”

Her face crumpled within seconds—tension tightening her features, her eyes widening as if someone had hit her with invisible force. The others fell silent immediately, the air thickening with sudden weight. Bella rested a hand on her arm, Sean whispered, “Everything okay?”



Alan felt his stomach twist, cold panic coiling in his gut—Dad, shit, please not another update about his heart—but Madison met his eyes and shook her head subtly, as if she'd read the thought right out of him. It wasn't that.

She hung up without another word. The phone dropped onto the table with a sharp clack. Her head lowered, her hands trembling just a little.

"I... I just got fired," she finally said, her voice flat, mechanical.

Questions erupted around her—"What?", "Seriously?", "How?"—and she explained in broken pieces. She'd been working part-time as an assistant for a wealth manager downtown, a job she'd taken to make ends meet while learning the ropes of finance—analyzing portfolios, writing up market summaries. Her manager had just called to inform her of "budget cuts", that they were letting several employees go, including her, effective immediately.

"That's bullshit," she spat, anger finally rising, color creeping into her cheeks.

"That firm is drowning in money—they close six-figure deals every damn day. I'm sure it's something else—maybe because I challenged him on a file last week, or maybe he just wanted to give the position to his niece. I don't care anymore—I never want to hear about those assholes again."

The table fell quiet again, heavier this time, until she started talking just to fill the void, staring into her empty glass as if the words were the only thing keeping her from breaking apart.

“Fuck, how am I supposed to pay my rent now? It’s due in two weeks, and without that paycheck…” She exhaled shakily.

“Yeah, I fixed the car, paid what I owed, but now what? I need another job, but it’s exam season. What if I can’t find anything for a month?”

She knew, deep down, that Rebecah’s ridiculous transfer gave her some breathing room—enough to cover next month, maybe a bit more if she tightened her budget and cut down on groceries and nights out. But after that? Not two months. Not without dipping into overdraft.

The thought made her throat tighten, panic coiling hard in her chest.



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The night dragged on anyway, the glasses refilling again and again as if they could drown the shock under layers of alcohol and forced distraction. The group threw themselves into it without hesitation: Bella ordered a round of ginger shots “to wake the dead,” Sean launched into a ridiculous story about a professor who once mistook a student for a pizza delivery guy mid-lecture, and Larry followed up with terrible impressions of the manager they’d had during their internship—bad enough to be funny, enough to pull a few stifled laughs out of Madison.

They all steered clear of the topic, drifting instead to jokes about upcoming exams or that series everyone was binging lately—an unspoken, collective effort to keep her afloat.

“Don’t stress, Madi, there are tons of jobs out there,” Sean said at one point, ever the pragmatic one.

“My uncle works at a bank in Manchester—I can ask if they’re looking for an assistant. Risk analysis, that kind of thing.”

Larry nodded. “Or that café downtown hiring baristas for night shifts. Could help out for a while.”

But Madison shook her head, a bitter smile pulling at her mouth.



“It wasn’t just a paycheck. That job actually taught me stuff—breaking down portfolios, writing reports, getting real experience… I wasn’t just serving lattes waiting for life to start.”

They all nodded quietly, realizing pushing further would only make it worse. The conversation eased back into safer territory until exhaustion finally settled over them.

By the time they left, the bar had mostly emptied out. Madison, who had driven that night, would take Alan, Sean, and Bella home—a routine trip through the campus streets lit by rows of soft orange streetlamps.

They stepped outside in a cluster, the autumn chill slapping their faces like a

sobering reminder, laughter fading into the damp wind carrying the scent of recent rain.

They had barely rounded the corner into the adjacent parking lot when an explosive noise ripped through the quiet—a shriek of metal followed by a heavy thud, like steel being crushed under brute force.

They froze for half a second, then rushed forward, hearts pounding. Madison reached the scene first and screamed, a raw cry cutting through the night.

Her Ford sat there, smashed in on the driver's side, the door caved in like a crushed tin can. A guy was still in the other car—a generic sedan with its headlights glaring—and they all saw him clearly: a vague shape, cap pulled low, staring at them with wide, panicked eyes before slamming the car into reverse. The tires screeched on the wet asphalt as he tore off into the street, vanishing before anyone even thought to grab a phone or catch the plate number.



It had happened in seconds—too fast, unreal, like some cosmic joke gone cruel.

Madison and the others stood stunned in front of the mangled wreck. They circled the car in silence. The door was folded in on itself, flakes of paint scattered across the ground, and the front wheel tilted at an unnatural angle.

Larry crouched down to inspect underneath, hand sliding along the underside of the chassis.

"Fuck… that's bad. The frame's probably bent. With an impact like that, the whole structure's compromised. It might be totaled, Madi. Not just cosmetic damage."

The words hit her like another blow. Madison's legs buckled slightly—she didn't have insurance on the car, a stupid decision she'd made to save a few pounds every month. And now all the money she'd poured into fixing it—the brakes, the alternator, the warning lights she'd finally gotten rid of—was gone. Burned away right here on this empty parking lot.

Alan snapped into action, pulling out his phone to call a local tow truck, explaining the situation with a voice tight but controlled.

"Yeah—hit and run. We'll take it to the nearest garage, thanks."



Madison couldn't speak. She shook uncontrollably, arms crossed tight over her chest like she was trying to keep herself from collapsing.

When the tow truck arrived—a loud rumbling beast that dragged the Ford away with clinking chains—Alan called a taxi and guided the group toward the sidewalk to wait. He rested a hand on his sister's shoulder, voice low, steady.

"Hey, Madi… we'll sort this out, okay? The car, the job—everything. You're not dealing with this alone."

But Madison looked hollowed out, staring at the cracked pavement like she wasn't really there. She only managed a mute nod, the words trapped somewhere deep where she couldn't reach them.

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The taxi sped through the dark campus streets, the lights from student residences streaking past as blurred smudges across the fogged-up windows. Sean and Bella were dropped off first, outside their cramped little rental squeezed between two identical buildings—a shared flat with thin walls and travel posters pinned up to hide the cracks. They hugged Madison tight, whispering, “It’ll work out, call us if you need anything,” before disappearing inside, the door slamming shut with a hollow echo.

The driver pulled away without comment, the meter clicking like a merciless reminder.

A few minutes later, the car rolled to a stop in front of Madison’s building—a rectangular student-housing block with peeling gray façades and tiny balconies overflowing with rusting bikes. But Madison didn’t move. She stared blankly at the dashboard, eyes locked on some invisible spot, as if the outside world had ceased to exist.

Alan turned toward her, frowning.

“Madi? We’re here. Hey—Madison!”

He raised his voice just enough to cut through the fog wrapped around her. At last she blinked, like someone waking from a heavy dream, and climbed out of the taxi in a stiff, robotic motion, her legs shaky on the cracked pavement.

Alan paid the driver with a crumpled bill, shooting another worried glance at his sister, who was already stumbling toward the entrance. He stepped out, slammed the door, and followed her without hesitation—no way he was leaving her alone tonight, not like this.

They climbed the creaking stairwell in silence, Madison dragging her feet like an automaton, not even throwing him her usual “Go home, I’ve got it” to push him away. That worried him more than anything. Normally she’d fight tooth and nail to be left alone, her independence a shield she wielded like a weapon. But now—nothing. Only that hollow look carving into her features, tightening something deep in Alan’s chest.

She pushed open her door with a tired gesture. The cramped apartment unfolded into a small living room and kitchenette cluttered with stacks of economics books and a laptop still glowing on the coffee table. Without a word, she collapsed onto the worn-out couch, shoulders slumped, burying her face in her hands.

Alan stepped inside hesitantly, closing the door behind him with a soft click. He moved toward her slowly, as if the floor might give way.

“Madi… are you okay? Do you want water or… I don’t know, tea? Just tell me what you need.”

That’s when she broke.

Madison lifted her head, eyes red and swollen, then burst into tears—hot, shaking, uncontrollable, like a lost child. Her shoulders convulsed with each sob, her whole body trembling.



Alan froze, stunned; he hadn’t seen her like this in years—not since the whole nightmare with Dad’s cancer, back when she’d held it together for everyone. He sat awkwardly beside her, placing a tentative hand on her back.

“Hey, Madi… it’s just a car. We’ll get another one, I promise. It’s not the end of the world.”

She jerked her head up, tears spilling, and snapped, her voice sharp and broken:

“Just a car? Are you stupid? Even if it is fixable, I don’t have the money! And I need it to work—well, I don’t even have a job anymore, fuck!”

The sobs returned, harder, her words tumbling out between ragged breaths as everything crashed down at once.

“And the job… those assholes, I know it wasn’t about ‘budget cuts’, but whatever. Now what? I can only pay rent one more time—one—before I’m completely screwed. Then what? I end up homeless?”



Alan swallowed, scrambling for the right words.

“Hey… I’ll help you, okay? Until you get another job, another car—whatever you need. I’ve got savings. We’ll figure it out. You’re not alone, Madi.”

But she shook her head violently, eyes burning with anger and despair.

“No. I don’t want your help. It’s just… too much. I’m fucking sick of everything, Alan. I’m disgusted. Completely disgusted…”

And then, like a spark in the chaos, an idea flashed through her mind—Rebecah.



She said it aloud before she even processed it, half to herself, half to him:

“What if we asked that rich bitch for money? Rebecah… She threw fourteen thousand like it was nothing, she can—”

Alan cut her off instantly, eyes widening.

“What? No—Madi, don’t even think about contacting that psycho again. Seriously, it’s a terrible idea.”

Madison stared straight at him, her gaze sharpening through the tears, determination hardening her expression.

“For seven thousand dollars, another kiss? Who cares, right?”

He tried to talk sense into her, stumbling over his words:

“Wait—just think for two seconds. It was already weird as hell the first time, and now? No way. Absolutely not. You’re not yourself tonight, drop it…”

But he knew her better than anyone—once she latched onto an idea, stopping her was like trying to halt a moving train. Impossible.

He let out a long breath, shoulders sinking as if the air had been knocked out of him.