The Offer

Chapter 9

The next morning, the dull gray light of a low, heavy sky seeped through the thin curtains of Madison's apartment, casting soft shadows over the stacks of open economics textbooks scattered across her coffee table. She sat cross-legged on the worn couch, a highlighter in hand, a mug of cold coffee abandoned at her feet, making a half-hearted attempt to focus on a chapter about financial markets. The words swam before her eyes, blurring into meaningless sludge, and she reread the same sentence for the fifth time without absorbing a damn thing.



Fuck, focus, Madi, she scolded herself, but it was useless. Her thoughts kept drifting back to the day before—to that bench in the mall, Rebecah's sly laugh, and the proposition that had knocked everything off its axis.

She'd slept like shit—broken, restless sleep, littered with confused dreams where unpaid bills tangled with hazy flashes of bare skin and knowing looks. Rebecah had flat-out refused their request for an advance, claiming with a calculated smile that "it would make things less exciting," but she'd promised to pay them every cent right after... the job. Twenty-one thousand dollars. Jesus. Enough to fix everything, yet now it sat on her chest like a concrete block. With a

frustrated grunt, Madison tossed her highlighter onto the table and jumped to her feet, pacing the cramped room.

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with me? It’s just exam prep, not the end of the world,” she muttered, her hands shaking as she dragged them through her tangled hair. But she knew exactly what was eating at her—the waiting, that deal hanging over her head like a blade, and the fact that Rebecah was the one holding all the strings.

Irritated, she grabbed her phone from the kitchenette counter and fired off a message to Alan without thinking: “Still nothing from that crazy bitch? Not knowing is seriously freaking me out.” She hit send and stared at the screen as if an answer might magically appear. Nothing. With a sigh, she tossed the phone onto the couch and forced herself back to her notes, willing her brain to cooperate. The minutes stretched on. When her phone finally buzzed half an hour later, she lunged for it.

Just a blunt “no” from Alan. No punctuation, no emoji—nothing. A surge of irritation burned through her, her lips pressing into a thin line.



“Awesome, thanks for the detailed update,” she muttered, flinging the phone aside again. She was sick of pacing in this shitty apartment, its walls seeming to close in on her. She needed air. Space. She threw on a light coat over her hoodie, grabbed her keys, and slammed the door behind her, heading down the creaking stairs to lose herself in the campus streets—anything to clear her head before the pressure finally crushed her.

Alan was stepping out of the campus gym, his muscles still warm and aching after an intense lifting session, his T-shirt plastered to his damp skin under the cool afternoon breeze. The low concrete building—its walls tagged with graffiti, its windows fogged up from condensation—still hummed with the clatter of weights and the thump of motivational playlists bleeding through the walls. He hitched his gym bag higher on his shoulder, nodding to a few regulars heading out at the same time, when Sean caught up to him, a towel slung around his neck and a tired grin on his face.

“Hey man, solid workout! You really went all in today,” Sean said, giving him a friendly slap on the back while wiping sweat from his forehead.

Alan chuckled, still a bit out of breath.

“Yeah, thanks to your expert advice. Without you, I’d have bailed after the third set. See you—don’t let me miss the materials lab tomorrow, or I’m screwed.”

Sean nodded, thumb up. “For sure. Catch you there. Get some rest—you look like a zombie.”



They split with a quick fist bump, Sean heading toward the west dorms while Alan took the opposite direction, back toward his crappy apartment on the edge of campus. The streets were lively at this hour: students on bikes weaving through pedestrians, the smell of fresh coffee drifting from a food truck parked on the corner, the low sun throwing golden light over the yellowing leaves.

Alan walked at a steady pace, trying to shake the mental fog that had followed him all day—that shopping trip that had gone to hell, Madison and her stupid proposition looping in his head like a bad chorus he couldn’t shut off.

His phone buzzed in the pocket of his gym shorts, a short vibration that made him sigh.

Madi again? Seriously, she's getting on my nerves—she already blew up my phone this morning, he thought as he pulled it out, ready to ignore yet another stressed-out message. But the name on the screen stopped him cold.

Rebecah.

His heart kicked harder as he opened the message, short and to the point:

"This evening. Hôtel Le Rivage, 8 p.m. Don't be late… ❤️😘😉"



It wasn't a threat—no. More like raw, barely contained excitement, almost feverish, bleeding through the emojis and ellipses, like she was already buzzing with anticipation. Fuck. A wave of dizziness hit him, his legs going weak, and he dropped heavily onto a nearby bench, the cold wood biting into his thighs through the thin fabric. Tonight? Fuck, already? He reread the message three times, trying to process it, his pulse hammering in his temples like he'd just sprinted flat out.

Hôtel Le Rivage—a classy place downtown, not his kind of scene at all, with sleek façades and rooms that probably cost a small fortune. It made everything feel too real, too close. He swallowed hard, pulled out his phone, and called Madison without thinking, fingers trembling on the screen.

She picked up on the second ring, her voice stretched tight as a wire about to snap.

"—Alan? Any news?"

“Yeah… She just texted. It’s for tonight, Madi. Hôtel Le Rivage. Eight o’clock. With hearts and smileys, like it’s some normal fucking date.”

There was a stunned silence, then Madison exploded, her voice shooting up an octave.

“What? Tonight?! That’s way too soon, fuck, way too sudden! Is she messing with us or what? We didn’t even have time to— to get ready, or think this through! Fuck, Alan, what do we do?”

They talked over each other in a rush—her spiraling over the timing, him trying to calm her down while feeling his own stomach knot tighter by the second.

“We don’t go, Madi… I—I don’t want to, seriously. We can say no, ask to push it back, or just—”



She cut him off sharply, her voice cracking like a whip through the line.

“Fuck, Alan, we can’t! What if she cancels everything? She already refused the advance, and I need that money, fuck. We don’t take risks. We go tonight. It’s just… two hours, like we said.”

A heavy, resigned sigh followed, and Alan finally caved.

“Okay… okay, fuck. Tonight, then.”

He sent a simple “OK” to Rebecah, heart pounding, before going back to Madison, trying to sound normal—almost.

Then he felt another vibration against his palm—a persistent buzz that made him flinch on the bench.

“Wait—another message,” he muttered, glancing at the screen. It was Rebecah again. This time, a link, with a short text: “Sign this before you come. Kisses.”

He let out a nervous laugh, forced, brittle, sounding fake even to his own ears.



“What the fuck? Seriously—she’s sending us a contract to sign digitally now? What is this shit?”

Madison exhaled on the other end of the line, tension and irritation bleeding into her voice. “I just got it too. Same thing—SMS, link to an online doc. Fuck… she really planned everything, didn’t she?”

They clicked at the same time. The document opened on both their screens—a formal PDF, neat blocks of text in an austere font, numbered clauses, and a box at the bottom for an electronic signature. Alan started reading out loud, hesitating, while Madison filled in the gaps, like they

were dissecting some absurd instruction manual together.

It was a confidentiality agreement, plain and simple, with a promised payment of twenty-one thousand dollars once everything was completed, paid immediately by bank transfer. They went quiet for a second, the number flashing in their heads—twenty-one grand, fuck, burned in there like it was written in fire.

The first clauses were almost boring, almost reassuring in their dryness: absolute prohibition on filming or recording anything, under threat of legal action; total discretion about the event, including toward any third party; no illegal substances on site; and a clause stating that consent had to be mutual at every step.

Further down, though, it got real. Concrete. Visceral.

The contract specified that Alan and Madison could choose not to touch each other, but that they were required to comply with Rebecah's requests—within the limits of explicitly given consent—for any sexual act involving either of them with her. It was all wrapped in dense legal jargon, endless paragraphs about liability and waivers, spelling out that everything was consensual, voluntary, and designed to protect against any later regret or dispute.

A full release. Like signing up for a skydiving jump—except for something way more fucked up.

They didn't know shit about law—not really. Just vague ideas picked up in class or from TV shows. Still, it all looked official enough, complete with digital stamps and references to UK confidentiality laws.

"This is fucking weird," Alan murmured, finger frozen above the screen.

"If we don't stick to a clause—like, if we refuse something on the spot—could they withhold the payment? That's kinda sketchy, isn't it?"

Madison swallowed audibly, her voice wavering just a bit.

"Yeah… sketchy. But at least it's official. We sign, and it's done. We don't really have a choice."



They hesitated another second, the blinking cursor feeling like a countdown, then clicked—electronic signatures added with a nervous tap, the document locking with a confirmation message. Alan let out a long breath, trying to ease the knot twisting in his gut.

“Alright… I’ll drive, okay? I’ll come pick you up later…”

A few hours later, Alan pulled the borrowed car up in front of Madison's building, the engine coughing one last time before dying. He'd tried calling her three times on the way over—nothing, just the empty buzz of voicemail. Their appointment was barely thirty minutes away now, and a tight knot of anxiety was already choking his throat. He took the stairs two at a time, heart hammering out of sync, and knocked on the door—three sharp, impatient raps.



No answer.

He pressed his ear against the chipped wood, straining to catch the muffled sounds inside—a rustle, a dragging step, like someone pacing in circles. The apartment was so badly built, with paper-thin walls and garbage insulation, that noise bled through without effort, a constant reminder of their broke student reality.

"Madi! Open up, it's me!" he shouted, his voice echoing down the empty hallway.

Still nothing.

Out of curiosity—or irritation—he wrapped his hand around the rusty handle and turned it. A strange metallic click sounded, followed by a dry crack, and the door swung open as the handle came clean off in his hand like a broken toy.

He stumbled inside and froze, face to face with Madison.

She stood in the middle of the living room–kitchenette, eyes wide, spinning toward him in a sharp, startled movement. Her gaze flicked from his face to the handle he was stupidly holding, and she let out a choked curse.

"Fuck—are you serious?!"



She shook her head, cheeks flushing beneath a layer of raw stress, muttering under her breath, “I should’ve known that Sunday handyman would screw it up… fuck, why didn’t I call a pro?” But Alan could tell immediately it wasn’t the door that had her on edge—her movements were jerky, rushed, like she was fighting something much bigger inside herself, hands trembling, breath coming too fast.

He stood there, dumbstruck, words jammed in his throat—because Madison was half undressed.

She was wearing mauve lingerie, unapologetically sexy, clinging to her curves with unsettling precision: a delicate lace bra and a matching thong that left very little to the imagination.

She met his eyes, felt the weight of his stare, and suddenly remembered what she was wearing. Panic jolted through her like an electric shock.

She yelped, arms crossing instinctively over her chest, and bolted for the tiny room she used as a bedroom, slamming the door behind her with a dull thud.

“Fuck, Alan! Get out of here! Are you stupid or what?!” she yelled through the door, her voice muffled but vibrating with embarrassment.

Alan took a step back, red up to his ears, the broken handle still clenched in his hand like damning evidence.

“Sorry! Shit, Madi, I—I didn’t mean to, the door just opened by itself!” he stammered, his flustered apology giving away how shaken he was. Then, grasping for something normal, he added, “You do realize we have to leave soon, right? We’re supposed to be there in thirty minutes, fuck.”



Madison answered through the door, her voice muffled, carrying a tone Alan hated instantly—tight, brittle, like she was barely holding herself together. He could almost swear he heard it tremble, a swallowed sob vibrating in the cramped air of the apartment.

“I—I didn’t know what to wear, okay? I took a shower, then I changed three times… four, maybe, because nothing worked, nothing felt… right for this fucked-up thing. And then you show up like that, no warning, and—”

Alan cut in gently, leaning against the opposite wall, the broken handle still clenched in his hand like a ridiculous trophy.

“Madi, stop. You didn’t have to… to dress like that. Seriously, it’s not—”

“Yes!” she snapped, louder now, the edge in her voice betraying all the panic she’d been bottling up.

“It was in the contract, Alan! Didn’t you read it? She spelled it out—‘suggestive outfit for the occasion,’ or some bullshit like that, with weird details about color and everything. I didn’t want to risk blowing the whole thing over something stupid.”



Fuck.

A shiver ran through Alan—part shock, part a treacherous heat he crushed immediately, though not before the image of Madison in that mauve lingerie burned itself into his mind: the lace tracing her curves, pale skin against dark fabric. Jesus.

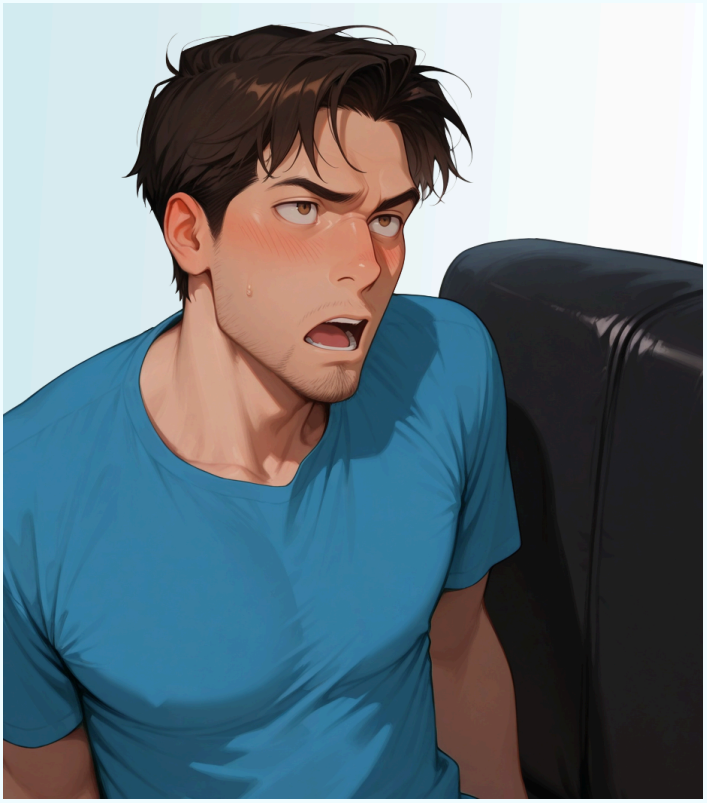
He cleared his throat loudly, as if he could scrape the thought out that way, and dropped onto the battered couch, the springs groaning under his weight. The living room felt even smaller now, cluttered with stacks of books on the coffee table, the stale smell of cold coffee hanging in the air.

Madison kept talking through the door, like it was easier than facing him, her voice cracking now and then.

“I’m scared, Alan. Really scared. We’re about to break something… something forbidden, you know? This isn’t just a game. It’s… us. Our bond, fuck. What if it blows up in our faces?”

Alan straightened slightly, his chest tightening at her distress—almost relieved she was finally saying it out loud. He forced himself to sound steady, calm, keeping his voice low to counter the storm he felt rising in her.

“Listen, Madi. We can just not go. Seriously. We cancel everything, block her number, forget this bullshit ever happened. It’s not too late. Yeah, we signed something, but fuck it—we’ll figure something else out for the money, okay? You’re not alone in this. I’m here.”



Her reply came instantly, breaking into what sounded like a stifled sob, a hitch that twisted his gut.

“No! I need that money, Alan. I need it—fuck. The car, the bills, all of it is crushing me. I can’t back out now.”

Silence followed, heavy and suffocating. Then the door finally opened with a soft click.

Madison stepped out, dressed now—a flowing black skirt that fell just above her knees, opaque tights hugging her legs, a thin sweater pulled on top. She looked composed. Almost.

But her red-rimmed eyes gave away the fight raging underneath.

Alan couldn’t stop himself from wondering, just for a split second, whether that mauve lingerie was still there beneath the layers of fabric, hidden. The thought made him flush. He blinked hard, forcing it away.

She walked over with hesitant steps, wiped a lone tear from her cheek, and sat down beside him on the couch, so close their knees brushed. Her shoulders were hunched, like the weight of the coming night was already crushing her. She fiddled nervously with the hem of her skirt, avoiding his gaze for a long moment before finally looking up at him, her pupils bright with a fear she could barely hide.

“You promise this won’t change anything between us? That we forget all of it afterward, and we never hear about that girl again?”



Her voice cracked on the last words. She swallowed hard, like she was forcing down another sob. Then, lower, almost a whisper loaded with raw embarrassment, she went on:

“Because… fuck, Alan. We’re going to see each other naked. Completely naked. In front of her. We’re going to watch each other… do things. With Rebecah. I’m terrified you’ll see me differently after that.”

The words hit him like a punch to the gut—her pleading look, the naked vulnerability in her voice, that visceral fear that made everything suddenly too real, too close. His pulse spiked, an unwelcome heat blooming in his chest, but he grounded himself, refusing to let his thoughts drift where her words were dragging them.

He opened his mouth to answer, to say again that they didn’t have to—

“Madi, we don’t have to—”

She cut him off sharply, her voice breaking into a desperate cry.

“Promise me!”

He stared at her for a second, heart pounding, then met her gaze head-on, seeing his own fear reflected in her wide eyes.



“I promise, Madi. It won’t change anything between us. We forget everything afterward, and we erase her from our lives. For good.”

She practically collapsed into his arms, a brief but tight hug, her body trembling against his for a moment, her uneven breathing warm against his shoulder. Then she pulled back, murmuring, “Thank you… really.”

Alan nodded, swallowing hard to push down the lump in his throat, and stood up in one smooth motion.

“Okay… we should get going. The hotel isn’t far, but with traffic…”