

Chapter 3

The room fell silent.

Bennett's expression tightened slightly. He stepped forward, took the phone from my hand, and ended the call.

"He's drunk and talking nonsense. Don't pay any attention to him."

"Really?" I asked softly. "Then who is Sharlene?"

Bennett was silent for a few seconds. "A girlfriend from college. She just transferred to our hospital from abroad. Xavier heard some rumors and jumped to conclusions.

"It's all in the past. Don't overthink it."

Lowering my head, I thought bitterly, "An

ex-girlfriend he left our engagement party for, someone he postponed our wedding for... He claimed it's all in the past.

"Was he trying to deceive me, or himself?"

I didn't say anything more and moved past him toward my studio.

"Maddie?" Bennett called out again.

I turned to look at him. "When did we reschedule the wedding for?" he asked.

Almost instinctively, I gave him a date. "The third of next month."

Then I realized that was the day I went abroad.

I opened my mouth but didn't explain further.

Maybe it was better for Bennett to find out

there was no wedding on the day I left.

The next day, when I left the studio, dawn was just breaking.

Bennett had already left for work.

Breakfast was laid out on the living room table with a sticky note beside it.

"Heat it before you eat."

In five years of our relationship, he was always this considerate.

But I always felt something unspoken between us.

I never understood what it was before. Now, I did.

His quiet nature wasn't innate. It was because he had nothing to say to me.

All the excuses I'd desperately made for him became laughable after he abandoned me at our engagement party for Sharlene.

I put the note down. My phone rang.

It was my agent, Martina Wagner.

"Maddie, are you free today? Someone is insisting on buying the centerpiece painting from your exhibition. Can you come down?" she asked the moment I answered.

I paused. The centerpiece was the first painting I'd ever done of Bennett—a view of his back.

I'd told Martina before the show that I wouldn't sell that one, only that one.

But now, keeping it meant nothing.

"Just sell it," I said. "Sell all the paintings related to Bennett, actually."

Martina sounded shocked. "What's going on? First the wedding, now this... Did you and Dr. Webster fight?"

I gave a weak smile.

"No. I just finally see things clearly. The things I valued had never been important."

At least, I was never important to Bennett.

I didn't say that part out loud.

Martina was quiet for a moment. "Okay. I understand."

After we hung up, the doorbell rang.

Our wedding photos had arrived from the bridal shop.

I opened the package and looked closely.

Bennett stood in his black suit, his expression cool and detached.

I wore my white dress, beaming, my arm linked through his.

Only now did I see it—there wasn't a hint of a smile on Bennett's face.

He didn't look happy at all in his wedding photo.

The irony cut deep.

So this was what it looked like when a man married the wrong woman.

I left the photo in a corner and went to my studio.

The room was full of sketches and

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paintings of Bennett.

A half-finished drawing still sat on the easel.

Each image felt like a weight pressing on my heart.

Now I finally understood my teacher's warning about never painting someone as we liked.

I realized that what I thought was a portrait of them was actually a reflection of my own heart.

My hands shook as I gathered every drawing I'd made of him.

The last one was from his birthday last year.

I carried the stack to the backyard and lit a

match.

The flames caught the paper, burning away his handsome face and what remained of my heart.

"Goodbye, Bennett," I whispered to the fire, my tears falling into the embers.

My phone buzzed. It was a text from Bennett.

"Maddie, emergency surgery. Won't be home. Eat yourself."

I gripped the phone and didn't reply.

Martina called again, sounding apologetic.
"Maddie, my son is sick. I have to go to the hospital. But the buyer needs the painting tonight.

"Can you drop it off? I'll send you the

"Can you drop it off? I'll send you the address."

I looked at the dying fire. "Okay."

I put out the ashes, drove to the gallery, picked up the painting, and went to the address Martina sent.

I knocked on the door, the painting in my arms.

A woman's voice called from inside.

"Benny, can you get that? It must be my painting."

I froze, the name hanging in the air. Before I could move, the door opened.

Bennett stood in the doorway, dressed in casual clothes.