

Chapter 4

We stared at each other, Bennett frozen in the doorway.

A heavy silence filled the space between us.

Before he could speak, footsteps sounded in a room.

Sharlene walked out, wearing a soft cream-colored nightgown. She noticed the painting in my arms and smiled warmly.

"Oh, my painting arrived! Benny, tell this lady to come in.

"Thank you for bringing it so late. Please, come in for a moment. Can I get you something to drink?"

Sharlene was the one who bought the

painting.

"That's alright," I said, shaking my head. I handed her the painting before turning to leave. "My job was just to deliver it. I should be going."

Bennett finally found his voice. "Wait..."

I didn't turn back, stepping directly into the elevator.

As the elevator doors slid shut, I leaned back against the cold metal wall and finally unclenched my hands, noticing the stinging crescents my nails had left in my palms.

Bennett, who had texted me about a late surgery just an hour ago, was here in Sharlene's apartment.

What were they doing tonight?

What had they been doing right before I rang the bell?

My mind was racing. I didn't dare stop, walking faster and faster away from the building.

I had just reached the sidewalk when I heard Sharlene's voice behind me.

"Wait! You forgot the receipt."

I took the slip of paper. "Thanks," I said, my voice tight.

"Can I ask you something? Why were you so set on buying that particular painting?"

Sharlene smiled. "The man in the painting reminded me of my first love, the man you just saw.

"We were together in college. He had a blue shirt like that. one he wore all the

time until it practically faded.

"I chose my career over him back then. It's one of my biggest regrets.

"I came back hoping to fix that mistake. I didn't want to live with that regret.

"Having the painting delivered tonight felt symbolic. I hoped it might remind him of our time together."

Her words made it hard to breathe.

"After all this time, doesn't it concern you that he might be with someone else? That he might be married?"

Her next sentence hit me like a physical blow.

"No. I made some discreet inquiries at the hospital. Everyone there says he's single.

"I suppose it's meant to be..."

I stood frozen on the spot, the night air feeling icy, seeping deep into my bones.

Now I could understand. No wonder not a single one of Bennett's colleagues had been at our engagement party.

After five years, he had never told any of them about me.

I didn't remember the drive home.

I sat in the large, silent, empty house and cried until there were simply no tears left.

It was only then that Bennett finally returned.

He looked at me, his lips pressed into a thin line. He was silent for a long moment before he spoke. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan to

lie.

"Lena needed help with her move today. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to get the wrong idea.

"Please believe me. It's strictly a colleague relationship. Once she's settled, aside from necessary work interactions, there will be nothing else."

I looked at him attentively.

It was never easy to choose between the one who loved you and the one you loved.

I thought, "Bennett, if you can't bring yourself to choose, then I'll choose for you."

"It's fine. I get it.

"Honestly, if I were you, I'd probably help

her too."

Bennett seemed taken aback by my calmness, by my lack of anger or tears.

After a pause, he asked, "Why did you sell the painting?"

I paused as I stood up. "She made a very generous offer," I said flatly. "The price was right."

Bennett reached out and held my wrist. "Maddie, don't be angry. If you want it back, I'm sure I can get it from Lena."

I shook my head. "No. It's obvious she values that painting a great deal.

"I wouldn't want to take that away from her."

I wouldn't fight for a painting. And I

wouldn't fight for a man, either.

I pulled my wrist from his grasp and continued up the stairs.

"The hospital is having its annual gala on Sunday," Bennett said. "Will you come with me?"

I paused. For five years, I'd wanted an invitation like this, a chance to be part of his professional world.

He was finally asking, on the very day it no longer mattered.

Some chances, once missed, were simply gone. The hurt they left behind couldn't be undone.

"No, I'm busy this weekend."

Rejected again, Bennett frowned slightly.

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"The whole weekend?"

"Yes," I replied. "The whole weekend."

I was busy with my visa paperwork,
packing my bags, and saying goodbye to
him.