My Brother's Best Friend's Secret Baby –

Chapter 6

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Chapter 6 Rosalie's POV My cleaning cart was still out in the hallway. It was the only coherent thought running through my head as I stood in the doorway of Conference Room Three, frozen, staring at the man sitting at the far end of the table. My cart was waiting for me outside, complete with its mop, spray bottles, and neatly folded stack of towels. I was supposed to be on the fourth floor in forty minutes. But none of that mattered anymore because Aiden King was here, ten feet away from me. He was wearing a suit that probably cost more than my monthly rent, and he'd changed.

That was the first thing I noticed, even before the panic or before blood seemed to turn to ice in my veins. He was different. He was still imposing and still carried that presence that could make an entire room feel smaller. But seven years had carved new edges into him. It had hardened him. His features were sharper now. Silver threaded through his dark hair at the temples. Just a few strands, but enough to notice. Fine lines marked the corners of his eyes. A scar cut across his jaw. Another, fainter one disappeared beneath the collar of his shirt.

He was looking at me the way he always had. As if he were assessing a situation. As if he'd already calculated every possible outcome. I hadn't prepared for any of this. My hand was still gripping the doorframe. My legs refused to cooperate. I was wearing my hotel uniform: a pale gray shirt with the embroidered logo on the chest, dark pants, and quiet shoes on the polished floor. My hair was pulled back. No makeup. An invisible employee. That was what I was supposed to be. Not someone he'd recognize. "Sit down," he said. His voice hadn't changed.

It was low, controlled, and sharp in its restraint. A voice I'd thought I'd buried seven years ago, yet hearing it now felt like being torn open all over again. "No." Slight surprise flickered across his face. He hadn't expected that. Good. 1 "Rosalie." "How did you find me?" My voice sounded steadier than I felt. "That's not important." "Yes, it is. To me. He leaned forward slightly. Both hands rested flat on the table with the same cold precision that had always been so unmistakably him. "What's important," he said, "is that I know." Something shifted inside me. Slowly at first.

Then all at once. "Know what?" I asked. But deep down, I already knew. He pulled his phone from inside his jacket, set it on the table, and slid it toward me. It was a measured movement, just like everything else he did. I didn't want to move or go near him, but my

legs carried me forward anyway. I looked down at the screen. The photograph had been taken from a distance. A telephoto lens, maybe. Or a high-powered zoom. It was clear enough that I could make out every detail.

She was standing on the playground beside a hopscotch grid painted on the asphalt, staring at something outside the frame. Her dark curly hair was braided into two pigtails. She was wearing the red jacket I'd found at a thrift store three months earlier. My daughter. My hands started shaking as I picked up the phone. I gripped it tighter and forced myself to really look at the picture, even though every instinct I had was screaming at me not to. Lucy had no idea she was being photographed. She was just standing there. The cold inside me turned into rage. "Who took this?" I shouted.

But it wasn't really a question. "A private investigator," he said. "I hired him eighteen months ago." He paused. "You disappeared. It took time to find you. Even longer to confirm... everything else." I set the phone back down with excruciating care, fighting to contain the anger threatening to explode out of me. "You hired someone to follow my daughter?" "Don't do that," he said. "I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. I was looking for you. Finding her was part of that. I lifted my head. "She's six years old." My voice barely trembled.

"Someone photographed a child on a school playground without her consent, without mine, and you call that part of a mission?" "No." For the first time, his expression hardened. "I call it my responsibility." The word landed between us like a gunshot. A bitter laugh escaped me. "Responsibility? That's what you're calling stalking a little girl?" "I'm talking about my daughter." Silence filled the room. For a second, the world seemed to tilt beneath me. Just one second, but it was enough to crack something wide open. My daughter. His daughter.

I sat down without meaning to, my legs giving out before my pride did. The silence that followed settled heavily between us, almost alive. "You don't have the right," I whispered at last. "I have every right." His voice remained calm, but something old and dangerous vibrated beneath it now. "You vanished. Without a word. Without leaving a trace. Your father filed a missing persons report. Your brother thought you were dead for two years." "I called my father. I told him I was safe." "Once. Then nothing." Read the latest chapters at novelceo (.)com. I clenched my hands into fists.

"And what gives you the right to judge me?" I shot back. "I know about Elena." The name dropped between us like a blade, slicing open memories I'd spent years pretending were buried. "The engagement," I said. "The pictures. It was all public." I looked him straight in the eye. "You were engaged." "It's not that simple." I laughed harshly. "Yes, it is. It's very simple. You slept with me while you already belonged to someone else. Then you erased me from your life. That's it. It's very simple." He didn't look away. "I ended the engagement," he said.

His hand dragged through his hair, roughening it in a rare display of nerves. "A week after you disappeared." (1 Something cracked inside me, but I crushed it immediately. "That's none of my business." "I know." Heavy silence settled between us again. Five

minutes later, he spoke, his voice lower. "I didn't come here to talk about the past. And I didn't come for forgiveness." He nodded toward the phone lying between us. "I came because I have a daughter who doesn't know I exist." His gaze locked on mine. "And that changes everything." The sting returned to my eyes.

I forced it back instinctively. "What exactly are you saying?" He stared at me, like a storm held tightly in check. "I want to know her," he said. Then his voice hardened with certainty. "And this time, Rosalie... I'm not leaving." Rosalie's POV My cleaning cart was still out in the hallway. It was the only coherent thought running through my head as I stood in the doorway of Conference Room Three, frozen, staring at the man sitting at the far end of the table. My cart was waiting for me outside, complete with its mop, spray bottles, and neatly folded stack of towels.

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