

11: Doubts About Her Motives

Beatrice noticed Caitlin entering and could tell she had overheard Sebastian’s harsh words. The atmosphere grew awkward, and Beatrice opened her mouth to explain, but Caitlin spoke first.

“Mr. Vanderbilt, you don’t need to worry,” Caitlin said firmly. “Let’s make things clear right now in front of Beatrice. I’m only here at the Vanderbilt estate to perform the duties of a ‘lucky bride.’ Once you’ve recovered, I’ll leave. There’s no need for us to fulfill any spousal obligations. For the duration of your recovery, we’re only a couple in name. My responsibility is to care for you, and that’s all. You shouldn’t feel burdened.”

By taking the lead, Caitlin laid her intentions bare. She had two goals for coming to the Vanderbilt estate: repaying a debt and finding her son.

Once Sebastian recovered, she would leave—but not without Howard. He was her son, and she was determined to gain full custody of him.

Sebastian felt a wave of relief. He had feared she might cling to the Vanderbilt name, refusing to leave. But her declaration put his mind at ease.

Beatrice, however, saw something in Caitlin that neither of them acknowledged: her strength of character, her unyielding spirit, and her clear sense of right and wrong. She believed Caitlin was precisely the kind of woman the Vanderbilt family needed, someone who could bring out the best in her grandson.

Moreover, Howard had already bonded with Caitlin, displaying a rare affection. It was a connection Beatrice couldn’t ignore.

“Caitlin,” Beatrice interjected gently, “don’t be so quick to make up your mind. Our Sebastian is an extraordinary man. If you marry him, you could have a life of comfort and happiness. Why not give it some thought? His condition will improve, I’m sure of it. And besides, the marriage certificate has already been issued.”

Caitlin’s eyes widened. “Marriage certificate? When did this happen?”

Beatrice handed her the red document, looking every bit the pleased matchmaker. Caitlin held it skeptically, wondering if it was even real.

“Well, you gave me your ID to verify your identity and star chart, didn’t you? I confirmed everything was genuine, so I took the liberty of having your marriage registered. Once Sebastian recovers, you two can hold a proper wedding.”

Beatrice’s intentions were kind, but Caitlin felt trapped. *If I have to divorce, doesn’t that make me a secondhand bride?*

“Grandmother! Enough! If the certificate’s been issued, then undo it!”

Sebastian was livid. He slammed his fist on the bed, furious at the turn of events. He had never wanted anyone’s care, let alone a forced marriage.

The outburst caused a sharp pain in his head, and Beatrice quickly tried to soothe him. “Alright, alright, I won’t say more. Rest well, my dear.”

She had no intention of annulling the marriage. In her eyes, Sebastian was lucky to have Caitlin, whether he realized it or not.

Once Beatrice left, Caitlin turned to Sebastian. “Mr. Vanderbilt, I know you don’t want this marriage, and I don’t either. How about we sign a divorce agreement? Once you recover, our marriage will be annulled automatically, and I’ll leave. How does that sound?”

“Fine!”

Sebastian agreed immediately. The idea of a written contract appealed to him—something concrete to ensure Caitlin couldn’t backtrack later.

To formalize the agreement, Sebastian called for his assistant, Xavi, to draft it.

When the agreement was ready, Sebastian had Xavi press his seal on it. Both he and Caitlin signed their names and left their fingerprints, making it legally binding.

Xavi left with his task complete, and Caitlin returned moments later with a tray of food.

“Mr. Vanderbilt, I’ve prepared dinner. Would you like to eat?”

“No.”

Sebastian’s voice was cold. He didn’t trust anything she made and worried she might tamper with the food.

“Suit yourself,” Caitlin said flatly, placing the tray down.

She left briefly and returned with Howard in tow.

After seating the boy on a bench and tying a napkin around his neck, Caitlin said, “Howard, it’s time to eat. Mommy made beef with vegetables, corn, and carrots. Doesn’t it look cute?”

Hearing her call herself “Mommy,” Sebastian scowled.

“You’re not Howard’s mother,” he snapped. “Stop calling yourself that. Don’t confuse him.”

He couldn’t stand the thought of Howard getting attached to Caitlin. If Howard’s biological mother ever returned, it would only make things harder for the child.

Howard’s little face puffed with indignation. *Who says she’s not my mommy? She is!*

Caitlin turned to Sebastian, unimpressed. “Listen, Mr. Vanderbilt, as long as our agreement stands, I have a duty to act as Howard’s mother. How I interact with him is none of your concern. Don’t undermine me.”

Her blunt tone left Sebastian fuming. If he ever recovered, he swore he’d take back control of his home—and his son. Right now, this woman had far too much influence.

Meanwhile, Howard stared at the plate in front of him, which looked like an adorable piece of art. The rice was shaped like a bunny, surrounded by colorful vegetables and tender beef. It was the most whimsical meal he’d ever seen.

“Open wide,” Caitlin said, holding out a spoon. “Mommy made this just for you. Try it and tell me what you think.”

Howard hesitated at first but opened his mouth when Caitlin reminded him he needed to eat to grow strong.

As soon as the food hit his tongue, his big eyes widened in amazement. It was delicious—better than anything he’d ever tasted.

Howard couldn’t believe it. His mommy’s cooking was magical.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Caitlin smiled. “Mommy will feed you more.”

Howard eagerly ate bite after bite, savoring every morsel. But halfway through, he stopped chewing and stared at the plate, his expression suddenly shifting.

“What’s wrong, Howard? Why aren’t you eating?” Caitlin leaned in, concerned. She noticed tears welling up in his eyes.

“Howard, why are you crying?”

She quickly set the plate aside and wiped his tears. “Are you feeling unwell? Tell Mommy where it hurts.”

Howard shook his head, his cheeks puffed with unswallowed food. He wasn’t in pain. He was scared.

Scared that this moment was just a dream.

Scared that if he finished the meal, his mommy would disappear.

As Caitlin fretted over Howard, Sebastian’s dry voice cut through the room.

“Hah! I knew your cooking must be terrible. Look at him—he’s crying because it’s so bad!”

Sebastian’s snide comment earned him an icy glare.

“Shut it!” Caitlin snapped.

But before she could figure out what was wrong, Howard did something that stunned them both.