

6: The Fierce New Mrs. Vanderbilt

No matter what Caitlin said, Howard refused to come out. Left with no other choice, she pretended to leave.

“Howard, I know you hate me and can’t accept me. If you don’t want to see me, then Mommy will leave now. I’m going, okay?”

Hearing her footsteps fading away, Howard panicked. He quickly scrambled out of the cave and ran to the path, looking around desperately, his little body trembling as tears rolled down his cheeks.

He thought she was really gone.

But he didn’t want her to go! He wanted his mommy to stay!

His small face was streaked with endless tears, no matter how much he tried to wipe them away with his sleeve.

“Mommy…” He wanted his mommy…

“Howard!”

Suddenly, Caitlin’s voice called out from behind him. Howard froze and turned around, his tear-filled eyes widening as he saw her standing there.

In that moment, he couldn’t describe his emotions. Every ounce of frustration and sadness surged forward.

His nose was still bleeding, staining his face, chin, and clothes. He felt utterly wretched. What if Mommy saw how messy he was? Would she hate him and leave him again?

He tried to wipe his face clean, but it only made the mess worse.

Caitlin’s heart shattered into a million pieces. She didn’t hesitate for a second—she ran to him and wrapped him tightly in her arms.

“Howard… my baby…”

She didn’t care how dirty he was.

To her, he was her world’s most precious treasure, finally found.

Howard didn’t push her away, but he also didn’t react much. He just stood there, letting the woman hold him.

“Does it hurt?”

Caitlin gently loosened her hold and gazed at his messy, bloodied face. She carefully wiped his tears and nosebleed with a handkerchief.

Howard shook his head. A little pain was nothing to him. He was a man, and men didn’t cry over pain!

To stop the bleeding, Caitlin picked soft grass from the garden, rolled it up, and placed it gently in his nostrils.

Howard stared at her with his big, round eyes. This woman—his mommy—was a complete stranger, yet she felt so familiar, so kind. She was just like how he had imagined her: gentle and beautiful.

Her hands brushed over his face, soft and warm, and her hug made him feel safe and loved. Was his mommy really back?

“All done, sweetheart. Let’s go home and get cleaned up, okay?”

Howard didn’t respond with hostility anymore, a small sign of acceptance. Caitlin smiled, scooped him into her arms, and carried him back toward the Vanderbilt estate.

When Caitlin returned to the estate with Howard, the servants at the door were astonished. Everyone knew Howard was a little tyrant. He wouldn’t let anyone touch him, let alone carry him.

How had this new Mrs. Vanderbilt managed to win him over in less than an hour?

Lucy, one of the maids, hurried over, alarmed at the sight of Howard. “Miss Lewis, what happened? Why is he bleeding so much?”

“He had a nosebleed. Please prepare clean clothes for him; I need to give him a bath.”

“Oh, right away!”

Lucy led them upstairs. As they reached the second floor, they heard the sound of smashing coming from the master bedroom.

A maid ran out, clutching her head and crying for help. “Miss Lewis, please go check! Mr. Vanderbilt is angry again!”

Caitlin carried Howard into the master bedroom, just in time to see a lamp flying toward them. She turned swiftly to shield her son, letting the lamp hit her back instead.

“Ugh…” Caitlin groaned in pain.

Howard, sensing his mommy had been hurt, furrowed his small brows tightly.

Caitlin handed Howard to Lucy outside the room and turned back to confront Sebastian. “Have you thrown enough tantrums yet?” she snapped.

Sebastian was in the throes of another fit, slamming his fists on the bed and thrashing wildly as if he wanted to destroy the world.

Without hesitation, Caitlin strode up to him and slapped him across the face.

SMACK!

The sharp sound echoed in the room as Sebastian’s head snapped to the side, leaving a clear red mark on his cheek.

It jolted him out of his frenzy.

Fury blazed in his eyes. “You crazy woman! Did you just slap me?”

“Yes, I slapped you! Do you even know what you’re doing? Your son is out there being bullied, and you’re in here throwing a tantrum like a child? What kind of father are you?”

Caitlin’s anger flared as she thought of Howard’s suffering, her heart aching even more.

“It’s none of your business! Get out!”

“Is that all you know how to say? ‘Get out?’ You think that solves anything? You’re acting like a spoiled brat! If you keep this up, you’ll be left to rot!”

After hurling those words at him, Caitlin stormed out, slamming the door behind her with such force it shook the walls.

Sebastian sat in stunned silence, his anger bubbling just beneath the surface. He felt utterly humiliated.

She was supposed to be here to take care of him, yet she was the one bossing him around. How dare she slap him—twice—and speak to him that way?

Fine. Let her have her moment. When he recovered, he’d make her pay.

Outside, the servants were frozen in shock. They had witnessed Caitlin slapping Mr. Vanderbilt and standing up to him.

“Wow…” whispered Lucy. “I’ve never seen anyone dare to do that before. The new Mrs. Vanderbilt is fearless.”

Caitlin ignored them. She picked up Howard and followed Lucy to the children’s wing.

In Howard’s bathroom, Lucy prepared the bathwater while Caitlin knelt down to brush the mud from his hair. “Look at you—so dirty! Let’s get you cleaned up, sweetheart.”

Howard blinked at her with his wide eyes, wondering why this mommy was so gentle with him yet so fierce with his daddy.

Caitlin helped him out of his filthy clothes. Howard, unusually docile, didn’t resist her touch.

Lucy was astounded. Normally, Howard never let anyone near him.

As Caitlin undressed him, Howard suddenly covered himself, his expression shy and defiant.

“All right, I won’t look! You can wash yourself, and I’ll help from here.”

The little boy climbed into the tub on his own, the clear bathwater quickly turning murky as it washed away the dirt on his small body.

Watching him, Caitlin’s heart ached. Howard, the eldest of her quadruplets, had been the firstborn, yet he was so thin his ribs were clearly visible.

“Lucy, why is Howard so skinny?” Caitlin asked, her voice trembling.

Howard had his back to her, but Caitlin gasped when she noticed scars on his back and legs.

Tears welled up in her eyes. “And these scars… How did he get these?”