

## 7: Big Trouble Brewing

From Lucy, Caitlin learned more about Howard’s life—details that shocked, angered, and filled her with guilt.

Howard had anorexia. He only ate food made by his father, Sebastian, refusing to touch anything prepared by others. Over the past month, with Sebastian in a coma, Howard had been surviving on bread, choosing hunger over eating meals from anyone else unless he was absolutely starving.

As for the scars on his body, some were the result of his own mischief, but many came from being bullied by two other boys.

Caitlin pieced it together—the two chubby boys she’d encountered earlier were Sebastian’s cousin’s children. They frequently bullied Howard, taking advantage of the fact that he had no mother to protect him. Howard’s inability to speak and his refusal to tattle only emboldened them further.

The more Caitlin learned, the deeper the ache in her heart grew, suffocating her with pain.

After cleaning Howard and stopping his nosebleed, Caitlin wiped the water off his small body. It was then she saw her son fully for the first time.

He had a face identical to Bruce and Arthur’s, but his features carried a sharpness and maturity far beyond his years.

“Howard...”

After dressing him in fresh clothes, Caitlin pulled her son into her arms once more, holding him tightly. She could feel the smallness of his body, the warmth of his life, the flowing blood in his veins, and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

This was her firstborn—the child she carried for nine long months and brought into the world.

Their bond was unbreakable, rooted in their shared blood and soul.

Finding Howard made Caitlin feel as if her life had finally become whole.

In her heart, she made a solemn promise:

Howard, Mommy will never leave you again. I’ll never let anyone hurt you. I’ll take care of you and make up for everything I owe you.

Before Caitlin could savor the moment, a commotion erupted outside.

A maid rushed upstairs, her face pale with panic. “Miss Lewis! Willa and Xylia are here, and they’ve brought others with them!”

“What’s going on?” Lucy asked, hurrying downstairs to investigate.

Outside the Vanderbilt estate, Willa and her daughter-in-law Xylia arrived with their two sons, storming in with an air of aggression.

“Lewis woman! Get out here!”

“Look at what you’ve done to my kids! Get out here now!”

Lucy quickly ran back upstairs to Caitlin. “Miss Lewis, did you hit Willa’s two young masters today?”

“Are you talking about those two chubby boys? Yes, I hit them. So what?” Caitlin replied calmly.

“Willa and Xylia are here to confront you. What should we do?” Lucy was visibly anxious; it was clear that Willa was someone the staff feared greatly.

“Then let’s go see what they want.”

Caitlin instructed Howard to stay in the room before heading downstairs alone.

Standing at the entrance of the villa, Caitlin’s tone was casual as she asked, “What’s all this racket? For a moment, I thought it was a pack of stray dogs barking outside. So noisy.”

Willa and Xylia’s faces twisted with rage as they saw Caitlin step out.

“Who are you? Where’s Jasmine?” Willa demanded.

“I am Jasmine,” Caitlin replied nonchalantly.

“No, you’re not!” Xylia pointed at her accusingly. “She’s not Jasmine. I know Jasmine—this woman is an imposter!”

The gathered crowd exchanged stunned looks.

So, the woman sent by The Lewis Family was a fraud?

“If you’re not Jasmine, then you’re just a fake!” Willa shouted, her voice shrill with fury.

“And how dare you, an imposter, bully my grandsons!”

Xylia added fuel to the fire. “And you even called us stray dogs just now? You’ve got some nerve!”

The pair glared daggers at Caitlin, their eyes practically spitting fire.

“When did I ever bully your grandsons?” Caitlin crossed her arms, utterly unbothered.

Willa yanked her two grandsons forward. “Kyle, Quinton, tell me—who hit you? Speak up! Grandma will make sure you get justice.”

“It was her!” The two boys pointed at Caitlin, their voices full of indignation.

“Did you hear that?” Willa seethed. “Look at their faces! They’re swollen with clear handprints. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Are you sure their faces aren’t just swollen because they’re naturally fat?” Caitlin asked coldly.

Xylia’s face turned red with anger. “How could you be so vile? Just because you don’t have children of your own, does that mean you can hit other people’s kids? And now you’re denying it?”

Caitlin let out a sharp laugh. “You keep accusing me of hitting them, but have you bothered to ask why I did it?”

Both women glared at her, saying nothing. Caitlin continued, “Your precious grandsons bullied Howard. I stepped in to teach them a small lesson, to show them what’s right and wrong. Is that so unreasonable?”

“Oh, I’ve never met a woman as shamelessly argumentative as you,” Xylia shot back. “An adult hitting children and then blaming them? Kyle and Quinton have always played nicely with Howard. They’re practically brothers. Stop twisting the truth to cover your misdeeds!”

“Brothers?” Caitlin turned to the boys. “Let me ask you—did you hit Howard? Did you stuff dirt and leaves into his mouth? Did you call him a mute and a bastard?”

The two boys, emboldened by their grandmother and mother’s presence, denied everything.

“No! We didn’t do anything to Howard!”

“Mommy, Grandma, we were playing with him, and this woman came and hit us!”

Willa’s face darkened with rage. “Did you hear that? My grandsons are innocent. You’re the one distorting the facts with your evil schemes!”

“Evil schemes? Twisting the facts?” Caitlin’s voice turned icy. “Just because Howard is small and can’t speak doesn’t mean you can bully him. Let me make this clear: now that I’m here, I won’t let anyone lay a finger on him again.”

Standing behind her, Howard quietly watched. Listening to her words, he felt an unfamiliar warmth in his chest.

So this is what it felt like to be protected by Mommy.

“You think you’re someone important?” Xylia sneered. “You’re just a fraud sent here to fool us. Don’t think you’re anything special!”

She lunged at Caitlin, but Caitlin moved faster.

Grabbing Xylia’s hair, Caitlin yanked her back and slapped her hard across the face.

SMACK! SMACK!

Then, with a swift kick, Caitlin sent Xylia sprawling to the ground.

“Ahhh!” Xylia screamed in shock and pain.

Everyone froze in disbelief. Even Lucy and the other servants gasped, their jaws nearly hitting the floor.

Oh no, Caitlin’s really in trouble now!

Messing with Willa’s family could easily escalate to Beatrice herself. Who knew how this would end?

Willa, trembling with rage, ordered her people, “Pick her up! Teach her a lesson she’ll never forget!”