

His kiss 281

Chapter 281

By now, Marie's livestream had climbed to the very top of the trending charts. Her viewer count surged by tens of thousands in mere moments.

A flood of comments poured in without pause.

"Stop! Don't drink it!"

"Life is priceless. No matter what's happening, don't do anything rash!"

"Marie's past behavior was extreme, but she looks genuinely distressed. If I were in her position, I might not surrender the company either."

"Marie has the experience to run the company. Gabriela is just a young woman—if she takes over now, she could ruin everything."

"They're family. Gabriela is taking this too far."

"Oh my God, someone stop her!"

“Has anyone called the authorities?”

The chat brimmed with pleas, urging Marie not to go through with it. Tears streamed down her face as she read the outpouring of concern. Almost everyone watching had rallied to her side, defending her right to keep the company and begging her not to drink the poison.

She wept a little longer, the viewer count smashing past two million. Inwardly, she smirked—Gabriela had become the internet’s villain.

Feigning remorse, Marie summoned fresh tears and spoke with grave sincerity. “Gabriela, I know I’ve wronged you. But Josh has always treated you kindly. After I’m gone, I hope you’ll be good to him. And Phyllis—she was young and foolish, acting on impulse. I hope you’ll let her be. I’m using my life to make amends.”

With a dramatic tilt of her head, Marie raised the bottle and drained it.

Within seconds, her eyes flew wide with horror.

The bottle held real poison.

Damn it, Dustin had deceived her. He had claimed she would be drinking cola, but it was poison. In truth, he meant to kill her.

Cold dread gripped Marie as she collapsed, writhing in agony, clawing toward her phone in a desperate bid for help. The comment section erupted in chaos.

Meanwhile, in a shadowy suburban room, Dustin held a phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. As he watched Marie foam at the mouth, a malevolent grin spread across his face. He had given Gabriela an opportunity, even offering to marry her, but her obsession with the Moss family's fortune and her refusal to reconcile left him no choice. She could not blame him for his ruthlessness.

As Marie's movements stilled, Dustin casually dialed the police, then guided a pre-arranged search team to her location. The site of Marie's broadcast proved elusive, and police searched fruitlessly for over an hour. Ultimately, Dustin's hired team found her.

By then, she was already unconscious.

An ambulance rushed her to the hospital, trailed by a frenzy of reporters. There, Dustin exchanged nods with the staff as a whirlwind of emergency treatments, including gastric lavage, began. The scene was pandemonium—gripping and shocking.

Netizens anxiously awaited updates on Marie's condition. Viral videos of the rescue exploded online, and her suicide attempt dominated the internet within hours, capturing the attention even of those who were rarely online. Public sentiment shifted, overlooking Marie's prior wrongs against Gabriela and adopting a sympathetic lens.

"No matter what Marie did before, I hope she pulls through."

"I wish Gabriela would ease up on her family. This has already gone too far."

“If Marie dies, Gabriela bears indirect blame for her death!”

Marie endured six grueling hours in emergency care.

Josh, overwhelmed with anguish, collapsed from grief and was admitted to the hospital himself.

Phyllis was completely unaware of her mother’s scheme with Dustin. She clung tightly to Dustin’s hand, sobbing, “Mom would never take her own life. She has always been resilient, never surrendering no matter the odds. She wouldn’t kill herself.”

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Dustin, feigning solace, murmured, “She’s strong—Marie will make it.” Inside, he fumed, blaming Phyllis for reckless remarks that could draw suspicion.

Nearby, a journalist covertly recorded their exchange and streamed it live. Many netizens expressed pity for Phyllis, though some grew wary.

“Phyllis’s words make Marie’s suicide attempt seem dubious. Could it be staged to ruin Gabriela’s reputation?”

“There have been similar ploys before. We should wait for the police investigation.”

But skeptics faced a fierce backlash.

“How much are you paid to spew this nonsense? Have you no conscience?”

“If you really think her suicide was an act, why don’t you gulp down poison yourself?”

The handful of netizens daring to doubt Marie were swamped with vicious attacks.

Two hours later, the emergency room’s sign dimmed, and the head doctor emerged, announcing briskly, “Good news, the patient has stabilized.”

Dustin froze for a moment as the doctor removed his mask, revealing an unfamiliar face—not the one he had paid off. Glancing aside, he caught his chosen doctor lingering nearby, giving a subtle shake of the head to urge restraint. Dustin’s sour mood began to lift; his plan had at least half succeeded. In the public eye, Gabriela was now the villain, her reputation in tatters. Wesley would surely abandon her, leaving her no choice but to crawl back to him.

The doctor, exhaling heavily, turned to Phyllis. “You’re related to Mrs. Hayes, correct?”

“I’m her daughter,” Phyllis answered quickly.

“The poison lingered in her system too long, damaging her brain and causing partial paralysis. She may be confined to a wheelchair permanently.”

Phyllis’s face drained of color. “How could this be?”

With her mother incapacitated, wouldn’t the Haynes Group slip back into Gabriela’s grasp?

The doctor expressed sympathy and directed a nurse to escort the patient to a hospital room.

Dustin, feigning tenderness, held the shattered Phyllis, a sly grin tugging at his lips. To him, Marie’s survival went against his original plan, but that changed nothing now that she was paralyzed. As long as she was out of the picture, the Haynes Group would be within his reach.

Marie, half-immobile, awoke in a frenzy, shrieking curses. “Why did you save me? I would rather be dead than a useless wreck in a hospital bed!”

Dustin filmed her outburst and blasted it online, sparking yet another wave of buzz. Gabriela’s name became a digital curse. She was branded heartless, monstrous, and vindictive.

Furious mobs of netizens gathered outside her villa, demanding that she come out and apologize to Marie. Even Tyler and Farley were targeted by online trolls.

Farley trembled with fury. “This is absurd! Miss Haynes was clearly set up by Marie—so why is she the one being blamed?”

Tyler, equally enraged, vowed to rally his three hundred friends to confront the brainless mob.

Yet Gabriela remained composed, replaying Marie’s livestreamed suicide attempt obsessively. A calculating woman like Marie wouldn’t genuinely attempt suicide—Gabriela was certain.

Wesley, standing nearby, spoke in a grave, icy tone. “Gabriela, I’ve arranged an escort to the manor. Why not lie low there for now?”

He had his own plans to handle Marie.

“No need,” Gabriela replied, pointing at the livestream. “Watch Marie’s face when she drank the poison.”

There was something off about Marie’s stunned reaction, as if she had just realized the poison was real. This staged broadcast might be hiding a murder plot.

Wesley swiftly called Billy. “Dig into Marie’s movements over the past few days. I want every detail—every place she went and everyone she spoke to, no exceptions.”

Wesley ended his call and strode toward Gabriela. He settled beside her, watching the recording unfold once more.

His voice carried quiet authority as he explained, “This particular poison is completely colorless and odorless. However, commercial versions include a pungent additive—a safety measure to prevent accidental ingestion. Marie is sharp enough that one taste would have tipped her off. She would never have kept drinking.”

That meant the poison in her system was unrefined. It lacked the safety additive. Obtaining such a substance required connections most people didn’t have.

Wesley shifted closer, his tone softening with reassurance. “We’ll uncover the truth soon. I promise you that.”

His hand rested on the back of her chair as he leaned in. From a distance, their posture looked like an embrace as they studied the footage together. Gabriela breathed in his clean, understated cologne, her hands trembling with sudden uncertainty over where to place them.

Farley and Tyler exchanged knowing looks. The moment Wesley learned of Gabriela’s predicament, he had dropped everything to come to the villa, even dispatching his assistant to investigate. What kind of employer protected a mere subordinate like this?

Gabriela’s body language revealed more than she would admit—she was falling for Wesley.

Farley’s thoughts drifted to Gabriela’s pregnancy, and suspicion pricked at him. Could Wesley be the father? He nudged Tyler toward the door, and the two slipped out without a word.

Silence settled over the study, leaving only Gabriela and Wesley. His pulse hammered as he lost himself in her luminous eyes.

“Gabriela,” he murmured, “I need to tell you...”

The confession shattered mid-sentence as Wesley’s hand flew to his chest, pain carving deep lines across his features. Alarm shot through Gabriela. His weak heart—how could she have forgotten? She guided him to the nearest sofa with careful urgency.

“Your chest—is the pain severe? Where’s your medication?” Her words tumbled out in a rush.

Wesley stayed still until the crushing sensation eased and his breathing steadied. Yet he found himself addicted to her tender concern, prolonging his performance even as the genuine pain faded. His fingers intertwined with hers as he whispered, “No pills needed. Just some warm water should help.”

Gabriela hurried to bring it. Even after he drained the cup, Wesley kept up the pretense, claiming the tightness lingered. She watched him wince and moan, doubt flickering at the edges of her mind. But this was Wesley—proud, reserved, a man to whom humor felt foreign—and the sweat beading his forehead looked real enough.

She gently dabbed the moisture away. “Would a massage help?”

Wesley managed a weak nod. She positioned herself behind him, lifted his arms, and worked her fingers along the tense muscles of his back. He surrendered to the sensation, eyelids drifting closed. His damaged heart had stolen countless nights of sleep, leaving him perpetually exhausted; only discipline since the surgery had aided his recovery, and the doctor had insisted emotional stability mattered.

Gabriela's touch showed professional skill, each movement calculated to ease his discomfort. Then bitterness bloomed in his chest like a dark flower.

Gabriela didn't have any romantic feelings for him.

When her palm pressed against his temples, his hand snapped up to capture her wrist. "Gabriela."

He wanted to propose marriage, to promise her access to every dollar in his accounts. He remained seated while she stood above him. The overhead lighting carved shadows across his face, sharpening the angles that made Gabriela stop and stare. For the first time, she understood how devastating masculine beauty could be from this vantage point.

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Her phone's shrill ring sliced through the spell like a blade. Reality crashed over Gabriela, and she realized how close she'd come to surrendering to Wesley's magnetic pull. She pushed away from him and lunged for the device.

Marie's voice exploded from the speaker, raw with hysteria. "You've destroyed me, Gabriela! I'll make you pay for this!"

Marie sounded unhinged, but Gabriela's response remained steady as stone. "Who gave you that poison, Marie? You know exactly who's responsible for your suffering. I'll uncover their identity myself." With that, she severed the connection with decisive finality.

At Gabriela's words, Marie's wild gaze snapped toward Dustin with laser focus. She suddenly addressed Phyllis. "Leave us alone for a while, Phyllis. Dustin and I require privacy."

Phyllis studied both faces before nodding. She then turned to Dustin. "Take proper care of my mom."

Once the room was quiet, Marie's stare burned into Dustin. "Close that door. Then bring me something hot to drink."

Dustin recoiled as if she'd struck him, his body going rigid. "I'm your family, not some hired help. If you want my cooperation, you'd better adjust that tone."

"Refusing to close the door?" Marie's lips curved into something that barely resembled a smile, the overhead light casting sinister shadows across her features. "What I'm about to say—if you're comfortable with eavesdroppers, then by all means, leave it wide open."

Dustin's expression darkened to storm clouds, but rebellion died in his throat.

He locked the door, then returned with a steaming cup of water.

Marie's paralyzed body required assistance. "Prop me up," she ordered. Dustin complied with icy efficiency, adjusting her against the pillows without a trace of warmth.

Without warning, her functioning hand flung the scalding water into his face.

It hit perfectly. Dustin's anguished roar filled the room as his hands flew to his burning skin. "Have you lost your mind completely?"

"You never replaced the poison with cola, did you?" Marie's words cut through his pain like sharpened steel. "You wanted me dead."

Dustin's rage crystallized into something far more dangerous—a laugh devoid of humor. He dabbed his scalded skin with clinical detachment. "I followed your instructions to the letter. I replaced the poison with cola, exactly as ordered. Perhaps residual toxins remained in the bottle. That's why you suffered."

"Do you honestly think I'm that gullible?" Marie's voice cracked with fury. "You're more ruthless than I imagined. What could you possibly gain from my death?"

Dustin shrugged with maddening indifference. "Does it matter? You achieved your goal—Gabriela's reputation is in ruins. Isn't that enough to satisfy your thirst for revenge?"

Marie drew breath to unleash another torrent of accusations, but he silenced her with a raised finger. "Listen. Keep this between us—and never speak of it again. Do you understand your current celebrity status? Your name is on every screen. Strangers weep for you, pray for your recovery, and curse Gabriela with fervor. Tabloid vultures are circling, desperate to monetize your tragedy. Remember—

walls have ears. One careless word from you, and the consequences will be beyond anything you can imagine.”

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His eerie calm finally pierced Marie’s defenses. Real fear bloomed in her chest. If she defied him, he had both the means and the will to make her life worse than death.

Regret crashed over her like a wave. How could she have been so catastrophically blind, trusting a man who wore meekness like a carefully crafted mask while plotting her destruction? Now she lay paralyzed, trapped at his mercy.

He locked the door, then returned with a steaming cup of water.

Marie’s paralyzed body needed assistance. She instructed, “Prop me up.” Dustin complied, but his obedience was cold. His movements were efficient, mechanical, and completely devoid of warmth as he arranged her against the pillows.

Without warning, Marie’s one functional hand hurled the scalding liquid at his face.

The water hit perfectly. Dustin’s agonized roar tore through the room as his hands flew to his burning skin. “Have you lost your mind completely?”

“You never replaced the poison with cola, did you?” Marie’s words cut through his pain like sharpened steel. “You wanted me dead!”

Dustin's rage hardened into something far more dangerous — a laugh with no trace of humor.

He dabbed at his scalded skin with clinical detachment. "I followed your instructions to the letter. Replaced the poison with cola, exactly as ordered. Perhaps residual toxins remained in the bottle. That's why you suffered."

"Do you honestly believe I'm that gullible?" Marie's voice shook with fury. "You're more ruthless than I ever imagined. What could you possibly gain from my death?"

Dustin shrugged with infuriating indifference. "Does that matter? You got what you wanted — Gabriela's reputation is in ruins. Shouldn't that satisfy your thirst for revenge?"

Marie's mouth opened to unleash another round of accusations, but Dustin silenced her with a single raised finger.

"Listen. Let's keep this between us — and please, don't ever speak of it again. Do you understand your current celebrity status? Your name is echoing across the entire nation. Strangers are weeping for you, praying for your recovery, and cursing Gabriela with passionate hatred. Meanwhile, tabloid vultures are circling overhead, desperate to monetize your tragedy for clicks and profit. Remember — walls have ears. One careless word from you will bring consequences you can't imagine."

Dustin's expression stayed eerily calm, but something in that stillness finally cut through Marie's anger. Real fear bloomed in her chest for the first time. If she defied him, he had both the means and the will to turn her life into something far worse than death.

Regret crashed over Marie like a breaking wave.

How had she been so catastrophically blind? She had trusted this man who had worn meekness like a carefully crafted mask while plotting her destruction. Now she lay...

Helpless, her vulnerability completely exposed to his manipulation, Marie's voice broke into a desperate prayer. "Your cruelty will come back to haunt you!"

Dustin's smile held the warmth of winter frost. "Don't get worked up, Marie. Your doctor emphasized the importance of rest. Who can say? Perhaps your recovery will surprise everyone."

With theatrical gentleness, he eased her back onto the mattress and smoothed the blanket around her.

Neither of them noticed the tiny camera lens aimed at them from the window, recording every damning word.

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Gabriela's name blazed across the internet once more.

Fiona's fingers danced across her screen, her joy deepening with each venomous comment targeting Gabriela. The crueler the words became, the brighter her smile grew.

Fiona had learned through bitter experience that her attacks often backfired spectacularly—which was why she now hesitated to strike directly. The designer bag fiasco still haunted her thoughts, a constant reminder of her miscalculations.

Then this scandal erupted online like wildfire. Euphoria consumed Fiona. She spent the entire night awake, her thumb tapping hearts on every cruel post about Gabriela, each like a small act of revenge.

The following evening, she transformed her excitement into celebration, gathering her friends for an intimate party. Vivian received her invitation along with the others.

The women clustered together, their faces twisted with disgust as they dissected Gabriela's downfall.

"Someone from such modest beginnings making this theatrical display over a failing company—it's completely unprecedented."

"Gabriela truly astounds me. Though her aunt and uncle had provided everything for her, she relentlessly pushed her aunt toward desperation—even to the point of drinking poison—all to take back the company. Every harsh word directed at her is well-deserved."

"I heard she once entangled herself with a man, supposedly accepted countless expensive presents from him, then cast him aside without a second thought."

Interest sparked in Fiona's eyes, and she leaned forward eagerly. "Tell me what happened next."

“The man stormed into Gabriela’s workplace to confront her, but somehow managed to insult her superior instead. Now he’s rotting behind bars.”

Fiona’s brow furrowed into deep lines. How could Wesley possibly find someone so morally bankrupt and tasteless as Gabriela appealing?

After exchanging a few more pieces of gossip about Gabriela, they reached a unanimous verdict that she was an indecent woman.

Vivian had remained silent throughout their vicious gossip, but at last her restraint shattered. She spoke with icy precision. “Your behavior is disgraceful.”

The group traded bewildered glances. Fiona frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Gossiping like high schoolers is pathetic. Don’t you think?”

Fiona’s expression darkened like storm clouds. “Vivian, why are you standing up for Gabriela?”

Vivian collected her purse with deliberate grace. “I’m just speaking my mind. Don’t include me in your gatherings again.”

Someone couldn't resist a parting shot at Vivian's retreating figure. "I heard Vivian crossed Gabriela before and was locked in the station for three days. She's probably terrified of her now, which is why she won't dare criticize her."

"But Gabriela isn't even here. What is Vivian afraid of? Pure cowardice."

Fury blazed through Vivian's chest. Where were the famed manners of these young ladies? They were nothing but meddlesome gossips masquerading as aristocrats.

She paused to collect her thoughts, then dialed the influencer called Gem. "Gem, I need that video immediately. Cost is not a concern. Just deliver it."

After the footage arrived, Vivian examined it briefly before contacting Gabriela directly. "Gabriela, I have something for you. Interested?"

Gabriela was trapped within the villa's walls at that moment. A mob of internet users—some paid agitators, others genuine fanatics—had set up an encampment outside her gates. They maintained their vigil through the night, determined to prevent her escape. Rather than courting unnecessary confrontation, Gabriela chose to abandon her office plans entirely.

Curiosity flickered through her voice. "What sort of something?"

Vivian's response came without hesitation. "Transfer half a million first."

Half a million dollars. For someone as financially cautious as Gabriela, spending such an astronomical sum on an unseen commodity was unacceptable.

“Absolutely not.” Gabriela’s refusal rang crystal clear. “I have no interest whatsoever. Keep your mysterious offering.”

Vivian’s voice climbed with disbelief. “It’s footage of Marie regaining consciousness and engaging in a heated argument with her son-in-law. Are you sure you don’t want this?”

Gabriela shook her head firmly. “No.”

Vivian felt her sanity begin to fray. Even while drowning in public outrage, Gabriela refused to spend money to resolve her troubles. Such infuriating stinginess.

Vivian drew a steadying breath and still sent the video to Gabriela, adding a pointed message: “Consider this a debt you now owe me.”

Gabriela’s reply arrived with lightning speed. “Thanks!”

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Vivian blinked in astonishment. Gabriela’s tone carried no trace of distress or panic—only renewed energy and determination. Vivian’s thoughts drifted to Fiona and her circle of malicious gossips. They prided themselves on their refined sophistication, yet Gabriela—utterly indifferent to their venom—possessed a peace of mind far beyond their grasp. The realization made surrendering the video feel far less frustrating.

The footage filled Gabriela with equal measures of surprise and delight. However, out of respect for her uncle, she decided to keep this ammunition in reserve for now.

Meanwhile, Billy's investigative team uncovered a striking lead. Two days before her dramatic live broadcast, Marie had spent an entire night gambling at an underground casino in Okburg, walking away with over thirty million dollars in winnings. She had even purchased a three-million-dollar bracelet on the spot to celebrate her incredible fortune. Given Marie's personality, who would believe she would contemplate suicide immediately after such a windfall?

Presented with this evidence, perhaps the enraged masses would finally recognize reason and stop allowing themselves to be manipulated like chess pieces.

Wesley asked Gabriela about her next move. Her response carried unexpected mercy. "I want to offer Marie one final opportunity. Hopefully, she'll find the courage to confess everything herself." If Marie admitted her deception and demonstrated genuine remorse, the internet mob might show some restraint.

For her uncle's sake, Gabriela truly hoped to avoid escalating the conflict any further.

As their conversation continued, Farley burst through the doorway unexpectedly, clutching an object shrouded in black fabric. "Ms. Haynes, a package arrived for you."

The announcement struck Gabriela as peculiar—she had placed no recent orders through any online merchants. Despite her confusion, she accepted the mysterious parcel and began to tear away its wrapping.

Wesley's voice cut through the silence like a blade. "Gabriela, stop."

Billy surged forward with protective instinct. "Ms. Haynes, if you'll permit me, I should handle this."

Gabriela offered a silent nod of agreement. Billy's fingers worked swiftly to unveil the contents, revealing a horrifying sight—a blood-drenched doll. Crimson liquid had been smeared across its glassy eyes, its sewn mouth, and its miniature torso, creating an image so grotesquely realistic it seemed to pulse with malevolent life.

Nestled beneath the macabre figure lay a message scrawled in matching red ink: "Gabriela, descend into hell!"

Terror drained the color from Gabriela's face as she fled toward the bathroom with desperate urgency. Wesley pursued her immediately, his footsteps echoing her flight. Inside the bathroom, Gabriela's stomach rebelled violently, forcing her to expel everything within—even the bitter bile that followed.

When she finally emerged, her lips were pale shadows of their former warmth.

Wesley's brow creased with deep concern. "Gabriela, are you okay? I'm taking you to the hospital."

She averted her gaze. "That's completely unnecessary—the doll just frightened me." The grotesque figure had looked so lifelike that her thoughts drifted to the precious life growing within her, triggering waves of protective nausea.

Wesley's intense scrutiny seemed to pierce through her carefully constructed façade, as though he could sense the truth beneath her words.

Gabriela redirected the conversation with practiced ease. "Mr. Moss, I will confront Marie directly. Could you arrange contact with some influential journalists?"

Wesley agreed with a decisive nod and instructed Billy to handle the arrangements.

The moment Gabriela crossed the villa's threshold, the assembled mob of internet vigilantes leaped to their feet and surged forward like a pack of hungry wolves.

"Gabriela, you finally show your face!"

"After committing such a despicable act, you should kill yourself!"

Wesley's protective instincts flared instantly. He positioned his broad frame between Gabriela and the advancing crowd, forming an impenetrable human fortress that radiated unwavering security.

Yet Gabriela stepped beyond his protective shadow and addressed the hostile gathering with remarkable composure. "I'm going to the hospital to visit Marie. You're welcome to accompany me."

Upon Gabriela's arrival at the medical facility, Phyllis launched herself forward like a missile, her eyes blazing with volcanic fury.

"How do you have the nerve to show your face here, Gabriela? You drove my mother to take her own life," she snarled with venomous intensity.

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Phyllis's eyes blazed with raw hatred, each glance sharp enough to cut glass. Dustin wrapped his arms around her trembling form, his voice dropping to a soothing whisper meant to quell the storm brewing within her.

To the world, he painted the perfect picture of devotion—a husband sheltering his beloved from harm. But behind that carefully crafted mask lurked something far more sinister—something that would devour any soul unfortunate enough to trust it.

A strange sense of gratitude washed over Gabriela as she watched them unfold. Phyllis had unknowingly saved her by stealing Dustin away—spared her from a fate worse than heartbreak. Men like him carried misfortune in their wake, leaving destruction trailing behind every woman who dared to love them.

When Phyllis caught Gabriela's steady gaze lingering on Dustin, triumph flickered across her tear-stained features. "You resent me because Dustin chose me over you, don't you? But what does any of that have to do with my mother? If you're burning with anger, direct it at me instead. Why did you have to hurt someone so innocent?" Her sobs turned theatrical, each cry designed to showcase her anguish over her mother's condition.

The crowd surrounding them began to murmur, their voices rising like a tide of judgment.

“Love has clearly blinded Gabriela completely. To attack the very family that raised her over some man—she’s nothing but an ungrateful wretch.”

A laugh escaped Gabriela’s lips, cold and cutting. “You know what, Phyllis? You two deserve each other perfectly—a heartless bastard matched with a manipulative witch.”

The accusation sent shockwaves through the gathered crowd. Phyllis’s face contorted with rage, her hands clenching into fists as if she might launch herself forward at any moment.

Gabriela brushed off the hostile comments swirling around her and fixed her attention on Dustin. “I need to ask Marie some crucial questions. Will you show me the way?”

Dustin found himself trapped under Gabriela’s piercing stare, an inexplicable dread crawling up his spine like ice. With so many witnesses surrounding them, he couldn’t risk any sudden move and grudgingly guided her toward Marie’s hospital room. Hospital policy prevented the entire mob from entering, allowing Gabriela to bring only two reporters as witnesses. Tyler stayed glued to her side, protective instincts on high alert. The reporters kept their cameras running, broadcasting every moment live.

From his car outside, Wesley watched the chaos on his phone, frustration gnawing at him. He belonged at her side in moments like this. Yet his performance yesterday—faking that heart episode—had backfired. Gabriela now treated him like fragile glass, insisting his status made him too valuable to risk in such confrontations.

The hospital room door swung open as Gabriela stepped inside. Marie was unleashing her fury on the hired caregiver, her bedridden state doing nothing to blunt her vicious tongue. The moment she spotted

Gabriela, her eyes ignited with pure malice, as if she could rise from the bed and tear her apart. “What brings you here? Did you come to gloat over my suffering?”

Gabriela gestured toward her companions with deliberate calm. “These reporters are streaming this conversation live, Marie. Are you certain you want to continue with that tone?”

Wariness crept into Marie’s features. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Gabriela produced the evidence of Marie’s recent gambling windfall. “Just two days before your supposed breakdown, you struck it rich and purchased a three-million-dollar bracelet. Why would someone planning suicide make such an extravagant purchase?”

Marie’s confident facade began to crack. Her face cycled through emotions before settling on theatrical despair. “You despise me, Gabriela, and rightfully so—I’ve been cruel to you all these years. But look at me now, trapped in this broken body.”

“Can’t you show mercy? Stop dragging up my past mistakes. Are you trying to destroy what’s left of Josh’s and my marriage? Do you want to see us divorce?”

Gabriela’s voice remained steady, unmoved by the performance. “I didn’t bring this evidence to watch you put on another show. Admit that your suicide attempt was nothing but an elaborate scheme, and I might consider dropping this matter entirely.”

Marie’s wails grew more desperate, more piercing. “I’m paralyzed, and you still claim I schemed my own suicide attempt? How can you be so heartless?”

Phyllis burst into the room, tears cascading down her cheeks like a waterfall of practiced grief. “Gabriela, I was foolish and selfish when I was younger—I know I wronged you terribly. But look at my mother’s condition now. I’m begging you to show compassion. Just please, stop tormenting her like this.”

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Without hesitation, Phyllis dropped to the floor, the sharp crack of her knees hitting the tiles echoing through the live stream.

The online audience, initially intrigued by Marie’s gambling revelations and sensing a plot twist, suddenly found their sympathies shifting. Human nature always gravitates toward protecting the seemingly powerless.

“Gabriela’s ruthlessness toward her own family is truly repulsive.”

“She shows no mercy even when she’s clearly in the wrong. Doesn’t anyone have the power to stop her? Where’s Phyllis’s husband? Why isn’t he defending his wife?”

“Who would dare cross her? Gabriela collects evidence like trophies. Challenge her, and you might find yourself behind bars.”

Gabriela was unaware of the flood of criticism pouring through the live stream, her focus laser-sharp on Marie alone.

“This is your final opportunity to tell the truth in front of everyone, Marie. For Josh’s sake, I’m willing to forget your attempts to destroy my reputation.”

Marie, noticing that Gabriela hadn’t revealed any additional evidence, convinced herself this was all an elaborate bluff. Her voice cracked with renewed sobbing. “Those winnings were a lucky break. I used that money to buy the bracelet for Phyllis. She’s my only daughter, and I want to leave her something precious before I end my life.”

Phyllis rushed to Marie’s bedside, her tears flowing like rivers. “Don’t worry about me, Mom. I’ll take care of you for as long as you need me.”

Mother and daughter wept in unison, their synchronized despair crafting a performance that ignited fury among the live stream viewers. “Gabriela has to be”

“The most heartless creature I’ve ever witnessed.” A weary sigh escaped Gabriela’s lips.

She had offered Marie a lifeline, but the woman had chosen to strangle herself with it instead. Her attention shifted to Dustin. “Do you have anything to contribute to this conversation?”

Dustin had planned to remain invisible, a shadow observing from the periphery. His true prize was the Haynes Group, and excessive public attention threatened to tarnish the respectable image he had so carefully cultivated. Being thrust into the spotlight made his jaw tighten with irritation. “My love for Phyllis runs deeper than words can express. Whatever path she chooses, she’ll find my unwavering support.”

“How touching.” Gabriela’s nod carried a finality that made the room’s temperature seem to drop. She retrieved her phone, fingers steady as she accessed the video Vivian had sent her.

“I followed your instructions to the letter. Replaced the poison with cola, exactly as ordered.”

“Your name echoes across the entire nation. Strangers weep for you, pray for your recovery, and curse Gabriela with passionate hatred.”

“Listen, let’s keep this between us—and please, don’t ever speak of it again.”

Gabriela’s phone delivered each word with brutal clarity, its speakers ensuring no syllable escaped unheard.

The live stream’s comment section fell into a stunned silence that stretched for endless minutes.

Color drained from Phyllis’s face as if someone had pulled a plug, disbelief transforming her features as her gaze bounced between her mother and husband. Her mother’s suicide attempt was premeditated—a cold, deliberate scheme. But Dustin had replaced harmless cola with poison, condemning her mother to this paralyzed existence.

Even Phyllis, for all her own cruelty, reeled at the magnitude of Dustin’s betrayal.

Marie and Dustin sat frozen, their web of lies crumbling around them like a house built on quicksand.

The hospital room became a tomb of silence, thick enough to suffocate.

Then Marie's composure shattered like glass hitting concrete.

The truth had emerged from its hiding place, and she understood that she was doomed. Rage consumed her remaining restraint, stripping away every pretense she'd maintained.

"Gabriela, you bitch! How dare you destroy me like this!" she spat.

Her one functioning arm flailed as she attempted to rise, fury giving her strength she didn't know she possessed. Her struggles grew so violent that gravity claimed victory, sending her tumbling from the bed to the cold hospital floor.

The others remained frozen in shock, with no one stepping forward to help Marie.

Chapter 290

Marie clawed across the floor toward Gabriela, her eyes blazing with pure venom.

For sixteen years, she had cemented herself within the Haynes Group, methodically crushing anyone who dared oppose her reign. Now Gabriela threatened to take it from her. The injustice burned through her veins.

Gabriela stumbled back, avoiding her touch as if it were acid.

The two journalists stood frozen in shock. They had expected breaking news, but nothing had prepared them for the raw malice radiating from Marie and Dustin.

One journalist snapped back to focus and swung his camera toward Gabriela. “Miss Haynes, after enduring family abuse throughout your childhood and facing false accusations as an adult, what’s going through your mind right now? Would you share your feelings with our viewers?”

The question felt hollow to Gabriela’s ears. “Can we end the live stream?” she whispered.

She had agreed to the broadcast for one reason—to silence the mob camped outside her home and reclaim a shred of peace.

The journalists, handpicked by Wesley, honored her request immediately and redirected their cameras toward Marie and Dustin.

Reality crashed over Dustin like ice water. His blood ran cold as the magnitude of his exposure hit him. His future had crumbled to ash. Forget competing for control of the Haynes Group—he couldn’t even guarantee staying out of prison.

While chaos consumed the room, he edged toward the door and slipped into the corridor.

The live broadcast's comment section erupted. "This revelation is absolutely devastating!" "Marie's and Dustin's cruelty is hard to believe."

"Thinking about their heartbroken speeches after that suicide broadcast and Marie's crocodile tears... it makes my skin crawl. These people are pure evil!"

"Gabriela survived hell because of these monsters. Without that recording, they would have destroyed her completely."

"Where were all you righteous keyboard warriors earlier? You couldn't recognize the truth and ended up helping these devils instead."

"Miss Haynes, please accept my deepest apology. I was wrong."

"Please forgive me, Miss Haynes!"

The shameless horde lined up with hollow apologies, as if typing sorry could cleanse their guilt and prepare them for their next digital lynching.

Adolf watched the unfolding drama, his emotions churning in dark currents.

Vivian's smugness radiated satisfaction. "I told you Gabriela was innocent, Adolf. You refused to listen."

Adolf's laugh cut through the air like shattered glass. "Smoke always signals fire. She should examine why accusations follow her like shadows."

His perception of Gabriela remained carved in stone—a ruthless manipulator. The future would provide countless opportunities for their paths to cross, and he possessed numerous methods to make her pay.

Vivian remembered her own past cruelty toward Gabriela and snapped back, "What exactly are you implying?"

His glacial stare silenced her. Vivian swallowed her defiance and extended her palm. "You lost our wager. Hand over the million."

Their earlier bet was simple—if Gabriela's innocence emerged, Adolf would give Vivian a million dollars. He transferred the money, his hatred for Gabriela deepening.

Gabriela drifted from the hospital room, her face carved from marble.

Josh waited in the hallway, his eyes swollen and red from weeping.

Gabriela froze mid-step. "Uncle Josh, what brings you here?"

She had learned about his collapse and hospitalization, deliberately timing her visit to avoid any encounter in Marie's room.

Yet fate had other plans.

Josh's voice emerged raw and broken. "Gabriela, I'm so sorry."

Her throat constricted painfully. "It's not your fault."

"I will make this right." Josh pushed past Gabriela into the room.

He lifted Marie from the cold floor and settled her gently onto the bed, smoothing her tangled hair with tender fingers. "Marie, calm down. We once lived under the constant terror of debt collectors. Then my sister cleared your debts, and after we moved into her villa, our circumstances transformed. Marie, I overlooked how you mistreated Gabriela and believed your excuses. I thought compromise would preserve peace, allowing us to function as a family. But now I see how wrong I was. Gabriela has endured far too much torment in silence. We cannot continue this shameful existence. When we do wrong, we must acknowledge it. Do you understand?"