

A Favor 671

Chapter 671

“You can go now, love. I’m fine here.”

He just nodded and kissed my forehead before finally disappearing from the kitchen.

“You know, Madi, I really do mean this — thank you,” Nancy said, once we were alone.

“Thank you? For what?” I was genuinely confused.

“For bringing my brother back.”

I watched her slice into the chocolate cake.

“Why — has he not visited in a while?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Thank you for bringing the old Gabriel back. The carefree, bold one. The one who used to smile and laugh and joke around with all of us.” She gave me an awkward little smile.

“Ahh...” I didn’t know what to say. What was I supposed to say — that it was all an act?

“He changed so much after the breakup with Stacey. Well — after she left him, really, that’s the more honest way to put it. My brother gave her everything. Everything. Even his dreams. You know what he originally wanted to study in college?”

I nearly stopped breathing. “No,” I said.

“He wanted to be a pilot. Gave it up entirely, because of her. She was studying Business Administration at the time, and since she wanted him close by — every day, every hour, every minute — she talked him into switching into business too.” She peeled off her plastic gloves. “Our parents never cared what we studied, honestly, we could’ve picked anything. That’s why Gab originally chose what he did. But eventually, he just ended up following whatever she wanted instead. After graduation, he proposed. Oh my God, the way she screamed when she saw that ring.”

Her expression soured, and she shook her head.

“So what happened after that? You’re killing me with the suspense.”

“Well — since he’d graduated in Business, our dad offered him the CEO position at WEC. He turned it down.”

“Why?”

“Because Stacey wanted them to start their own business instead. Clothing line, if I remember right. And she wanted to travel — everywhere, all the time. So that’s what they did, after graduation. Bouncing from country to country. God, my brother was like a lovesick puppy back then, chasing after her wherever she went.”

I swallowed down a sudden ache in my chest, doing my best not to let it show, and kept listening.

“Whatever Stacey wanted, Stacey got. And if you ever asked Gabriel why he gave her everything, he’d just say — ‘Because I love her, and I’d do anything to make her happy.’ Stupid, right?” She waved a hand through the air. “And then what happens? She just leaves him. Betrays him, for that bastard Ray, of all people!”

“Ray?” I asked, though the name already sounded familiar.

“Stacey’s new boyfriend. Her old high school classmate. Sure, he’s handsome, but nothing compared to my brother. I honestly don’t know what she sees in him.”

“So after the breakup, he just... became a different person?”

Chapter 672

“Exactly. He shut himself off, Madi. Didn’t want to see anyone. Wouldn’t even open a social media account. It’s like Gabriel just stopped being Gabriel. I’ve missed him for over a year now. So — I really do appreciate you being here.”

I just gave her a small smile.

“So he really did love her, back then, if losing her changed him that much?”

Honestly, I didn’t even need to fake being upset about it — not with how genuinely off I already felt.

“Oh my God—” Her eyes went wide, hand flying to her mouth.

“What?” I asked, feigning innocence, even though I already knew exactly what that horrified look meant.

“Madi, Gabriel would actually kill me. Oh my God, forget everything I just said!”

I tried to laugh it off, though I think what came out was closer to a wince.

“Oh, Madi, I’m sorry,” she said, biting her lip.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I let it slip. Because I know he hasn’t told you any of this yet. I’m so sorry, Madi. Please — please don’t tell him I said anything.”

I took her hands and gave her a soft smile.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell him.”

“Thank you.”

She pulled me into a hug, and I hugged her back. We ended up laughing together right after.

“But you know what — I really haven’t liked her, not since the moment Gab introduced her to us.”

“Why not?” I said, trying to laugh it off.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just a sister’s instinct.” She smiled, taking both my hands. “Unlike you, Madi.”

“What do you mean, unlike me?” I looked at her, catching the sudden seriousness in her expression.

“I’ve liked you since the very first time my brother mentioned you. The first compliment he ever gave. And the moment I actually met you, I knew — he was telling the truth.”

“Wow. What exactly did he say about me?”

I honestly couldn't picture Gabriel talking about me to his family.

“Not telling you that one. That's a secret you'll have to dig up from my brother yourself.” She giggled, wagging a finger at me.

“Nancy, please — he'll never tell me. Your brother's an idiot sometimes!” It slipped out before I could stop it, and it made her laugh even harder.

“I really do like you, Madi. Not only do you make my brother laugh, you also call him an idiot. I approve.”

“Because it's true! He's not just an idiot sometimes — he's an idiot all the time!” I said it loudly, and we were both still laughing when the idiot himself walked into the kitchen.

“I heard that word again — idiot. Now I'm really curious who this idiot is you two keep talking about,” he said, walking toward me.

“Ah — the idiot—”

“Shh, stop right there, Nancy. I'm not falling for that excuse again,” he said, holding up a hand to cut her off.

“What excuse?”

“That you’re ‘just talking about your favorite movie.’ Come on, try something more original next time.”

“And where do you think you’re going?” I asked, watching him close the distance between us.

Chapter 673

“I’m going to grab you and kiss you,” he said, smiling, and I nearly choked.

“Oh my God — please don’t tell me you two are about to start making out in the kitchen. Ew. I swear, if you do, I’m never setting foot in here again. Disgusting!” I couldn’t help but laugh at Nancy’s face.

“I never said we were going to make out. I said I’m going to kiss my girlfriend. You’re overreacting.”

“Gross!” And with that, she stomped out of the kitchen, leaving us alone.

“Fine, she’s gone.” I shoved his chest, which by then was only inches from mine.

“So now what?”

“Now — can you stop acting like the lead in your own little theater production, pretending you’re about to kiss me?”

“Oh, darling. This isn’t a performance. I really am going to kiss you.”

My eyes went wide. “Gabriel—”

Damn this man. Why did he always want to kiss me? It wasn’t that I minded it — it was that I didn’t want to get used to it.

I shoved him back and glared, but the idiot just laughed straight in my face.

He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me so tightly I couldn’t move, couldn’t even protest.

“Gabriel, what are you doing?” I squirmed against his hold, but he was far too strong — I couldn’t budge my arms at all.

“I’m holding you tight, my love.”

“God, that is not how you hug someone properly, Mr. Wilsons.” And just like that, he let go.

My eyes widened at how fast he dropped his arms.

“What did you just call me?”

“Ah — I — I—” I couldn’t manage a single word, so I shoved past him instead and darted to the other side of the table.

“Ah, my love. Is that what you want — you want me to chase you?” A wicked smile spread across his lips.

“No!”

“No? Then why call me that?”

“What, Mr. Wilsons? Because it’s your last name. It’s — formal.” I bit my lip, circling the oval mahogany table as he kept pace, chasing me around it.

“Ahh, alright. My future Mrs. Wilsons — I promise, once I catch you, I’ll kiss you so deeply you won’t be able to breathe.”

We were so caught up in the back-and-forth over what to call each other that we completely forgot everyone else was still there — including Nancy, who'd started filming our little chase on her phone, and his parents, watching us like they were living out a scene from their favorite movie.

"Is that so?" I asked, unbothered.

"Exactly. So get ready."

"Ahh, I'm so scared, love."

"You should be, my love. Wait for me."

"Ha—" Whatever I was about to say died in my throat when he suddenly leapt over the mahogany table and, in the blink of an eye, was standing right in front of me.

"Ohh—" My mouth fell into a perfect O.

"Now, my love — may I collect my reward?" he asked, that breathtaking smile spreading across his face.

Chapter 674

If we were anywhere else, I could just stand here and admire that face, that dimple.

He raised an eyebrow when he noticed me smiling, and I couldn't stop myself — I poked his dimple with my index finger, grinning like a fool.

"You're so cute when you smile. I love this dimple," I said, the words slipping out before I could think better of them. His smile had me completely dazed.

"Just the dimple?" he asked, and I looked straight into his eyes and shook my head.

"I love you."

That's my heart talking, I told myself, not my mouth. Except somewhere along the way, I'd said it out loud.

He went still, staring at me. My lips had gone dry, and without thinking, I wet them with my tongue — and his eyes followed every bit of it. I watched him swallow hard, and a moment later he pulled me in and kissed me. I kissed him back. Our lips moved together, perfectly in sync. He drew me closer, one hand at the back of my neck, kissing me like I was the air he needed just to keep breathing.

A flash of light — something like a camera — snapped me back to reality. I nudged him and tilted my chin toward the people standing behind him. My face burned crimson with embarrassment.

"They're watching us," I whispered, biting my lip.

He reached up, freeing my lip with his thumb.

“Don’t do that, or I won’t be able to stop myself from kissing you again,” he warned, pulling me to his side.

He rested a hand on my shoulder and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. When I looked up at him, he kissed my forehead too.

A smile tugged at my lips, and I let my face rest against his chest.

Madi’s Point of View

“Ahhh, that’s so sweet, dear! They’re just adorable.” Their mother started walking toward us, clapping her hands together.

Both of them wore genuine, happy smiles.

“I’m so happy for you, son. You’ve finally found the woman of your life.” Mr. Wilsons gave him a light pat on the shoulder, while Mrs. Wilsons pulled me into a tight embrace. Nancy was smiling too, phone already put away.

A sudden unease settled over me. I wish I could say the same, I thought. I'd love to be able to say it — proudly, loud enough for the whole world to hear — "Yes, I am your woman!" But I can't. None of this is real. It's just another part of the act.

"Thank you so much, Madi. You were truly an angel, sent straight from heaven into my Gabriel's life." Mrs. Wilsons took my hand in both of hers. I swallowed hard and glanced at Gabriel, but he'd already looked away.

"An angel? What do you mean, Mrs. Wilsons?" I asked, hoping to ease the moment a little.

"Oh, it's about time we dropped all this formality. Just call me Mom." My eyes went wide.

Mom? I thought.

Chapter 675

"And don't call me Mrs. Wilsons anymore, either — you'll be entitled to that name yourself soon enough."

"Huh?"

"I know you'll be calling me Mom eventually anyway, so why not just start now? I overheard my son calling you his 'future Mrs. Wilsons,' so why wait? What do you say, darling?" She turned quickly to catch her husband's attention.

Every head turned toward me at once. I bit my lip, glancing at Gabriel — but that idiot just stood there grinning, useless as ever.

“Yes, Madi. I’d like you to start calling me Dad too, from now on.”

My eyes widened, and a small, helpless laugh slipped out before I could stop it. I had no idea what my face was doing in that moment — half of me wanted to laugh, the other half wanted to strangle Gabriel.

“Dad...?”

“Yes. Much better than ‘Mr. Wilsons’ forever, don’t you think?”

“And don’t forget — call me Mom,” his wife added, smiling.

“Okay. Mom.”

She hugged me again. “Thank you, Madi. We’ll always be here for you and Gab.” She pulled back, catching my eye once more. “And about my earlier condition — don’t worry about it. If you two want to give us more grandbabies down the line, that’s perfectly fine. You can even start right now.”

“Hehe.” I managed a weak, half-hearted smile, genuinely at a loss for words. Thankfully, Gabriel finally seemed to register how complicated this was getting and stepped in.

“Mom, you don’t need to pressure her. We’ll figure that out on our own.” He took my hand and pulled me closer to his side.

“Alright, fine. Speaking of which — your aunts and I are planning a family picnic by the lake tomorrow. So I want everyone up early. The boys head out first to fish and get the grill going, and the women follow once lunch is packed.”

“Ah, I’ve been waiting for this, Mom!” Nancy shouted, delighted, pulling her mother into a tight hug.

“I know, sweetheart.” Mrs. Wilsons patted her daughter’s hand lovingly and kissed the top of her head.

Watching that little scene made me think of my own mother. I didn’t even realize I was smiling until Gabriel gently squeezed my hand. I glanced up at him, silently asking with a raised eyebrow what was wrong.

He just nodded toward his sister.

“Nancy,” he called.

“Hmm?”

“Why’d you have to take pictures earlier?” he asked, clearly annoyed.

“What do you mean? What’s the problem?” she shot back, raising an eyebrow of her own.

“What’s the problem? You don’t think that’s an invasion of privacy?”

“Excuse me? Invasion of privacy? As far as I know, dear brother, you were standing in the family kitchen. Last I checked, that kitchen belongs to the whole family. So no, there’s nothing invasive about it whatsoever.”

“You don’t get it at all.”

“Oh, I don’t get it? Which part exactly am I not getting? I told you — no funny business in the kitchen — and you didn’t listen. Disgusting.”

Chapter 676

“Hey, kids, that’s enough! My God, you’re both grown adults. Why are you still fighting over nothing, like a couple of toddlers?” Their mother stepped between them, while their father just shook his head.

I smiled, guessing this had probably been the two of them, exactly like this, since they were kids. It was hard to believe Gabriel had this side to him at all — bickering like he was younger than Nancy, when it was actually the other way around.

“Mom—”

“Stop it, Nancy. Honestly, you two fight like cats and dogs. Can’t you two act your age for five minutes?”

Mr. Wilsons and I simply exchanged a glance and a quiet smile. He gave me a small nod — a signal that he wanted to talk. On the outside, I tried to look unbothered, but inside, my stomach was in knots, nerves twisting through every part of me.

I took a breath and followed him out to the porch, where a stunning garden in full bloom stretched out before us. He leaned against the railing. I stopped beside him, breathing in the sweet scent of flowers.

“How are you, Madi?”

It wasn’t the question I’d braced for, and it felt loaded with meaning. Did he mean me, personally? Or me, as his son’s girlfriend, wading through all of this?

“I’m fine, Dad. At least, I think I am.” I forced a smile. My heart was practically leaping out of my chest.

“Good. Do you really love Gabriel?” I had to swallow hard at that.

“Yes. I love him,” I said, unable to meet his eyes.

“I can see that.”

My eyes shot up to look at him. I had no idea what was going through his mind. If he could see through the act — or maybe, if he could see that somewhere along the way, I’d stopped pretending.

“I can see it in your eyes. In the way you look at my son.”

I didn’t say anything back — just turned my gaze to the garden again.

“You know something, Madi? I like you. I can tell you’ve made my son happy. You’ve brought his smile back.”

I swallowed again. It echoed almost exactly what Nancy had told me in the kitchen.

“I hope you stay by his side, Madi.” My breath caught as he looked at me. “I hope you really stay with him, whatever happened before. I hope, one day, you truly fall in love with him — help him become the best version of himself. If that ever happens, Madi, I’ll owe you a debt I could never repay.”

I bit my lower lip, about to say something, when Gabriel’s voice cut in. I sighed inwardly, relieved.

“Dad!” he called.

Wow. That was intense, I thought.

“Son,” his father said, turning. “I’m just having a little chat with your girlfriend.” He smiled.

“I see,” Gabriel said, his tone noticeably more serious.

I looked away, pretending not to listen, though curiosity was eating me alive.

“Take care of her, son. She’s special. You could search the whole world over and never find another like her. Try to love her.”

Chapter 677

I couldn’t hear whatever Gabriel said back — I was too lost in my own head. What did he mean, “stay with her”? “Try to love her”? Does he already know everything? And if he does, why is he still pretending he doesn’t?

“Everything okay?”

Gabriel’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts as he stepped up beside me. I just nodded.

“Can I ask you something?” I swallowed and glanced up at him. He was already looking at me.

“Earlier, in the kitchen — before you kissed me — you already knew they were watching?”

My breath caught halfway up my throat. Is that why he thinks I said ‘I love you’?

“Yes,” I said, forcing my brightest tone. “I already saw them. That’s why I said it.”

A lie. A massive lie.

“Hmm,” he said, nodding, turning to look back out at the garden.

“Why? It’s all part of the act anyway, right? I was just playing my part,” I said, looking away from him.

“Right. Of course. All part of the performance. You did well, Madi.”

I couldn’t say anything back. All I could manage was a bitter smile. I hated this feeling, hated it down to my core — the lying. Not just to everyone around us, not just to Gabriel, but mostly to myself. I no longer even understood what was happening to me. Was I actually falling for him? Was this what people meant by love? I always thought love was supposed to feel good. So why did it hurt this much?

I looked at him for a long moment, and he looked back. His eyes were full of something — so many things — and for the first time, I couldn't read a single one of them.

Gabriel's point of view

I noticed when my father asked Madi to join him in the garden. She accepted gracefully and followed him out to the veranda. I couldn't go after them right away — my mother was still going on about the minor disagreement I'd had with my sister.

Whenever she starts in like that, lecturing us about being siblings, about not being kids anymore, neither Nancy nor I ever get to leave until she's finished. We just have to stand there and take it, hoping she wraps up sooner rather than later.

Once she finally did, I made my way out to the veranda, where I found my father and Madi deep in a serious conversation.

"Father!" I called out.

He turned and smiled at me.

"Son. I'm just having a little chat with your girlfriend."

"I see," I said, my tone more serious than I meant it to be. I had no idea what they'd been discussing, or what he might have said to her about me.

Madi had turned toward the garden by then, her back to me.

"Take good care of her, son." My father gave my shoulder a pat when he caught my questioning look. "She's very special. You could search the whole world over and never find another like her. Love her. Respect her. Always."

Chapter 678

I couldn't find a single word to say. It seemed my father had already put it all together. Unable to speak, I just nodded. He went back inside, and I walked over to where Madi stood. She didn't notice me approach — she seemed completely lost in thought. I let out a breath before asking:

"Are you alright?"

She looked at me and nodded.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, my eyes fixed on hers, unblinking. She nodded again.

"Earlier, in the kitchen — before I kissed you — did you already know they were watching us? Is that why you said you lo—"

“It was,” Madi said, with a beautiful smile. “I’d already seen them. That’s why I said I loved you.”

I don’t know why, but that answer, so casually given, left me with a strange, uncomfortable weight in my chest.

“Hmm.” It was all I could manage. I nodded and turned back toward the garden.

“Why? It’s part of the act, right? I was just playing my part.”

“Right. All just a performance. You’re doing a great job, Madi.”

She was right, of course. All of it was a grand act — a charade, part of the bigger game I’d set into motion. I studied her expression, and she held my gaze steadily. But the smile she gave me didn’t quite reach her eyes before she turned back toward the garden.

I hope you can forgive me, Madi. I’m sorry for dragging you into all of this. I promise, once this plan’s finished, I’ll let you go. But I need you by my side a little longer — I need to get Stacey back. Only then can I show her exactly the kind of pain she put me through.

I looked away from Madi, watching a white butterfly settle on a red rose. I let out a long breath before turning back to her face.

I wish we could just stay like this, all the way through this whole charade. I'm sorry, Madi, but you can't fall for me. You can't fall for a man carrying this much wreckage from the past. I can't give you my heart — I don't even know where I lost it. I'm not sure there's anything left in my chest to give.

"Hey, man, what's on your mind?" Philip clapped a hand on my shoulder. I was sitting on a barstool, working through one of my father's favorite bottles of cognac, lost somewhere in my own thoughts.

"Nothing much. Just thinking," I said, before finishing off the rest of my drink in one go.

"About something, or about someone?" Justine, standing to my left, chimed in. "You know what, I'm just glad you've finally moved on from your ex—"

"Justine!" her brother cut her off, his tone disapproving.

I just sighed.

"What? What's wrong with what I said? Isn't that right, Gab?" She looked to me for backup, then turned back to face him. "He's clearly moved on. Can't you see he's got Madi in his life now?"

"Well, I fully agree with that. You're lucky to have found someone like her, cousin. Seriously — don't let her slip away."

I smiled and nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m not letting her go anywhere. Even if I have to tie her to my waist.”

Chapter 679

“That’s the spirit! Go get her!” My cousins traded a high-five.

Just then, laughter drifted over from the kitchen, and we all exchanged puzzled looks, curious what was going on.

“That’s our moms having fun,” Philip said, shaking his head.

“Let’s go check it out — maybe they’re back to trading dirty jokes. Good luck to your girlfriend, Gab.”

That was when I remembered Aunt Morgan had dragged Madi off toward the kitchen earlier. I had to agree — I got up quickly and headed toward the noise. We were still a few steps out when we heard Nancy’s laughter carrying down the hall. We stopped in the doorway, watching the girls with “my girlfriend” — all of them working on dinner together, chatting and laughing as they went.

“Madi, did you know Gab’s allergic to peanuts? Anything with even a trace of them?” Nancy asked, munching straight out of a bowl of peanuts.

“I know,” Madi answered, confident, which made my eyebrows shoot up. How did she know that? I’d never once mentioned it to her.

“Nancy, why don’t you cut up the carrots and cabbage?” I bit my lip as Nancy’s face fell.

“Mom, you know I can’t do that!”

“How will you learn if you never try?”

“But, Mom—”

“It’s fine, Nancy. Come on, I’ll show you.” Madi took the knife and cutting board from her hands.

“Okay!” Nancy beamed. “Hey, little sister — do you actually know how to cook?”

“Um, I do.” Madi returned my sister’s smile and leaned in to whisper something in her ear. My eyebrows went up on their own, curious how readily Nancy agreed to whatever it was.

Then Madi started chopping vegetables, Nancy hovering nearby with her phone out. I could hardly believe what I was seeing — the speed at which she worked through every ingredient in front of her.

“My God — how did she—” Justine started.

“How’d she chop through all of that so fast?” Philip finished for her.

I glanced over and found the same stunned expression on their faces that I was probably wearing myself.

“Wow, little sister! How’d you do that?” Nancy asked, voicing what we were all thinking. Madi just shrugged, smiling.

“Guess it’s because I cook a lot. I love it.”

“Gabriel is so lucky to have you, Madi.” Justine and Philip both clapped me on the shoulder at their mother’s remark.

“And you know what they say — the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” That one, definitely, came from Aunt Cindy.

“My Gabriel is so lucky to have you!” my mother added.

“Seriously! You know Stacey couldn’t even lift a pan, let alone actually cook anything.”

“Nancy!” All three women — my mother and both aunts — scolded her at once.

“Oops. Sorry. Excuse me, Madi.”

Madi didn’t say anything, just gave my sister a small smile. Honestly, if I could’ve broken my sister’s neck without actually hurting her, I would have done it the second those words left her mouth.

Chapter 680

“Well, I’m with Nancy on this one. Your ex couldn’t wash a single spoon, let alone cook a meal.”

I looked over at Justine, seriously reconsidering that same plan for her.

Thankfully, Aunt Cindy decided it was the perfect moment to change the subject. Before long, everyone was laughing and chatting again, Madi and Nancy still going at their impromptu cooking lesson.

Gabriel’s point of view

After dinner, once we’d all settled into the living room for a family chat, Uncle John suggested a short break for something a little more fun. He pulled three microphones out of a drawer — this was how our family always connected on weekends. I sat next to “my girlfriend,” watching her join in on the girls’ conversation about whatever women talk about.

“Madi, do you sing?” She looked surprised when Uncle John handed her a microphone.

I raised an eyebrow, a little skeptical, as she smiled and accepted it.

“Is it alright if I sing something, Uncle John?” she asked, smiling. Every eye in the room turned toward her.

“Of course, dear. At least you can actually sing — not a total buzzkill, like that witch Stacey.”

“Nancy!”

Every girl in the room, except Madi, turned and shouted her name at once. I shot her a look too, shaking my head. Suddenly, all eyes swung toward the two kids, Savahna and Christian.

“See? I told you Stacey was a total witch!” Sav shouted, and Chris jumped in with a giggle of his own.

“Witch, witch!” he added.

“Savahna! Christian! Where on earth did you two learn that word?” Aunt Cindy turned sharply toward her kids, and I glanced back at Nancy, who was nervously chewing on a nail.

I knew how hard Stacey leaving had been on everyone — Nancy especially, she'd cried enough tears for both of us combined. I loved my sister to death, but in moments like this, I also wanted to knock some sense into her.

"Sorry about that, little brother," she said, flashing a peace sign.

"You don't need to apologize, Nancy, it's fine," Madi said, simply smiling at her. "If you want, I'll let you pick a song for me."

"Really, little sis? Oh, I love that." Nancy jumped up excitedly and pulled Madi in closer.

"Why are you dragging her off?" I couldn't help but ask.

My sister, stubborn as always, just ignored me and raised an eyebrow.

"It's fine, love," Madi said, smiling at me, and I let out a heavy sigh.

"Brother, relax — your sister isn't going to bite your sweetheart." Justine took the opportunity to sit beside me the second Madi left with Nancy.

I didn't answer her. I just watched Madi laughing at whatever cheesy joke Nancy had made. A few minutes later, Mom and Dad came back with a bottle of scotch and one of wine.

“Ooh, this is going to be fun!” Aunt Cindy and Aunt Morgan clapped their hands together.

When Dad finally cracked open both bottles, he handed me a glass of whiskey and poured wine for Madi.