

A Favor 681

Chapter 681

“Little sister, don’t be shy — just say if you’d rather not drink...”

“I’m drinking, Nancy, don’t worry about it,” she said, laughing, and I returned the smile.

“You really shouldn’t stare at her that hard, Gab. She’s already yours. Keep looking at her like that and she might just melt on the spot — then you’ll really lose her.” Philip gave my shoulder a friendly pat, grinning wide, and I jabbed him in the side.

Uncle John started off the singing, then Dad, then Mom, then Uncle James — and now it was Madi’s turn. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Before she could even start, Nancy snatched the microphone right out of her hand.

“Everyone, I want to say this is one of my favorite songs — since my little sister let me pick for her, I’m taking full advantage.” She handed the mic back to Madi.

Madi stood up immediately, glancing my way. She smiled, then turned her focus to the screen.

I’m not sure why, but the moment our eyes met, something about it felt right — too right, in a way that made me uneasy, like I was losing my grip on something I shouldn’t be feeling at all.

She sang about falling for someone she never meant to fall for — about how something that felt so wrong could somehow feel so right, about being caught off guard by love arriving at the worst possible time, about not knowing how to stop it even as she tried to convince herself it wasn't real.

Every eye in the room stayed fixed on Madi from the first note to the last. When she finished, the whole room broke into applause. I couldn't move from my seat. She had a real gift — the kind that pulls a whole room in and holds it. Even Aunt Cindy and Nancy had misty eyes by the time she was done. And I had to admit, there was something about the song itself — or maybe just the way she sang it — that had settled somewhere deep in my chest.

"Wow, Madi, you sing beautifully. You've got real talent. You truly fit right into this family — even Gabriel's got some talent hiding in him somewhere."

She glanced at me in that moment and smiled. I smiled back, and Aunt Morgan stood up, clapping again.

"My God, little sister, you had me in tears," Nancy said, still sniffing. "Do you even know why that's my favorite song?"

"No, why?" Madi asked, a little confused.

Nancy took her hands, and the two of them made their way back to their seats. Dad launched right into the next song before I could catch Nancy's answer. I just watched them, surrounded by whispers and easy smiles.

Chapter 682

I found myself smiling too, watching how naturally she fit in with my family. Maybe it was just her personality. Watching her laugh, I noticed something I hadn't before — she had dimples when she smiled. How had I never noticed that? Beautiful when she smiled, somehow even cuter when she was mad. She was just—

"I already told you, don't stare so hard. She might actually melt under all that attention, man!"

I just smiled and shook my head as Philip handed me my glass of whiskey.

"You really love her?" My head turned toward him automatically at the question.

"What kind of question is that?" I said, frowning.

"You still haven't answered."

"Ugh — do I really need to answer that?" I avoided his eyes.

"Of course you do. Just yes or no. Do you actually love her, Gabriel?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't be introducing her to all of you if I didn't."

“Fair enough,” he said, shrugging. “That’s really all I was asking. You love her — great.”

“Then why the question?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

He took a sip before answering. “Let’s just say — I’m still not entirely convinced you’ve actually moved on from Stacey.”

“Ugh, Stacey’s in the past. I’m not talking about her anymore,” I snapped, taking a sharp sip of my whiskey.

I gripped the glass tighter than I meant to. It seemed like everyone had an opinion about Madi and me. Whatever was between us should have stayed between the two of us. I needed to talk to her — soon.

Madi’s perspective

“My God, little sister, you really made me cry,” Nancy said, still sniffing, the moment I finished my song.

I just smiled at her and glanced toward Gabriel. I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“You have any idea why that’s become my favorite song?”

“No, why?” I asked, a little puzzled.

She took my hands and led me back to our seats.

“Because I have a friend from school who ended up falling for her best friend. He never noticed all the effort she put in. She kept loving him anyway, even though deep down she knew he’d never see it — because he was already in love with someone else. That song was for him, really. In my head, anyway.”

“Ahh, damn. That’s rough, hearing her story.”

“Anyway — let’s cheer up tonight! To you, always by Gabriel’s side, and your future kids!”

We raised our glasses, laughing as we toasted. When I glanced back at Gabriel, I caught him frowning at something Philip had said. He looked up at me right as I looked away.

Mr. Wilsons seemed thrilled with the song he’d sung, clearly meant for his wife. The moment he finished, he handed the microphone straight to his son. I looked at Nancy, and she nudged my arm.

“What?” I asked her.

“He’s actually going to sing?” she said, eyes wide, nodding toward her brother.

“Why wouldn’t he?” I asked.

“It’s just — he stopped singing after he broke up with... ah, sorry.” She clapped a hand over her mouth like even saying Stacey’s name was some kind of sin.

“Why do you always apologize when you say her name?” I asked, brow furrowing slightly.

Chapter 683

“Because she’s his past, and you’re his present,” she said, a little awkwardly.

I took a breath before speaking.

“Nancy, I actually like that — she’s just his past, and I’m his present. And I don’t mind if you talk about her. I just hope my eyes show the same thing my words do.”

“Can I pick your song, Gab?” Justine asked, snatching the song list right out of his hands. She’d already gotten halfway through picking before he could object — he just stayed quiet and let her decide.

“Alright, done. Here you go,” Justine said, grinning.

Nancy and I settled back, watching Gabriel's brow furrow as he glanced at Justine, still smiling smugly on the sofa. He gave a small, slightly nervous nod, and — to my surprise — walked straight over and kissed my forehead. Everyone was watching. I held my breath as he leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"Love, I didn't pick this one — that's all Justine, putting it up on the screen." I just smiled at him, trying to silently ask what it meant with my eyes. Honestly, he didn't need to say much more than that.

"I just wanted you to know," he said, smiling again, brushing his hand against my cheek while the other held the mic. Then he began to sing.

I straightened up in my seat the moment the first notes started.

The song was a raw, aching question — asking someone when exactly their love had died, wanting to know for his own sanity, wondering if it had happened on some specific night that had haunted him ever since, or if it had simply gone cold long before.

Even knowing he hadn't chosen it, every line he sang felt like it was tearing straight through my chest.

The song went on to remember a time when he'd been adored completely, when he would've given anything to bring that feeling back — and how now, even in their most intimate moments, he could feel that she was somewhere else entirely.

To me, it sounded like the most personal question in the world, aimed straight at her. When did she stop loving him?

The moment he finished, no one clapped — except me. I looked around at each of them, but every single gaze was locked on Gabriel. The silence was almost unbearable.

He walked over, pulled me up out of my seat, then sat down and pulled me right back onto his lap. He wrapped both arms fully around my waist and buried his face against my neck.

I'll admit, I was confused, even a little shaken. What is happening right now? Everyone had gone quiet, all eyes fixed on him. With his face pressed into the curve of my neck, I could feel every single gaze in the room settle on us.

"Madi, could I speak with you outside for a moment, sweetheart?" Aunt Cindy asked. Before I could answer, Gabriel cut in.

"Why do you need to talk to her now?" His whole expression went sharp, cold.

Chapter 684

"Because I'm the one who asked her to," his mother said.

"And why does Aunt Cindy need to talk to Madi?"

"Because your father and I need to ask you something!" His grip on my waist tightened.

“Madi, is this alright with you, sweetheart?” she asked me directly.

I looked up at Gabriel, silently pleading for an answer. He nodded.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be right behind you,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my lips, then another to my forehead.

Nancy, Aunt Morgan, Aunt Cindy, and I walked out to the veranda together and settled onto the big mahogany bench.

Gabriel’s perspective

“What is this, Mom? Why do you need me back here in the kitchen? Has Aunt Cindy already pulled Madi outside?” I asked, unable to hide my irritation.

“What’s going on? You’re asking me that? Shouldn’t I be the one asking you, Gabriel?”

“What do you mean, Mom? What are you even talking about?”

“What am I talking about? What was that, back there — that song you just sang?”

“So this is all about the song? Come on, Mom, it was just a song. What’s the big deal?”

“You know it wasn’t just a song, Gabriel! It was gutting. A personal question — asking your ex when she stopped loving you? What was that about?”

“Mom, for God’s sake, I already told you, it was just a song! And I didn’t even choose it, Justine did!”

“Whether you chose it or not, Gabriel, singing that particular song in front of the woman you’re currently with — that was a mistake.”

“Mom.” I smiled. “I think you’re overreacting. I didn’t do anything to hurt Madi.”

“Who says you didn’t? Did you even look at her face while you were singing?”

I didn’t answer, curious to see where she’d take it. Besides — I knew Madi was just playing a role.

“You’re hurting that girl, Gab.” She tilted my chin up so I had to look her in the eye. “Let me ask you something serious, son. And I need an honest answer.” She paused, studying me. “Have you actually healed from what happened before?”

I was thrown by the question — it caught me off guard. It had been over a year since things ended with Stacey, and no one had ever asked me that so directly.

“Mom, it’s been a year already—”

“Just answer the question, Gabriel. Yes or no. Have you truly moved on from your last relationship?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m over it. It’s in the past. Buried. Why bring it up again?”

“Because I can see the truth in your eyes, Gabriel. Actions can lie. Eyes can’t.”

I laughed at that. “Ah, Mom, when did you become a fortune teller?”

Her expression only hardened. “Why — you want me to guess what’s going through your head right now?”

I stayed quiet. She cupped my cheek.

Chapter 685

“Gab, I want you to learn to appreciate what’s right in front of you. You have Madi.” I said nothing. “If you keep picking at a wound, it’ll never close. If you keep clinging to old pain, it’ll never heal. Let go of what’s already gone, and move forward.”

That was her final word before she turned and walked back inside. I stood there alone, caught somewhere between the past, my own pain, Madi, and the game I'd started.

Madi's Point of View

Nothing hurts more than realizing he meant everything to you, but you meant absolutely nothing to him.

My face fell the moment that text came through from Sandy. Just a quote, out of nowhere. I was already getting ready for bed — pajamas on, Gabriel still somewhere out of the room.

What does she mean by that? I wondered.

I sat on the edge of the bed, reading the message over again, so absorbed in my phone that I didn't notice Gabriel walk through the door and pass right by me into the bathroom. I didn't even catch the raised eyebrow he gave me on the way.

Another message from Sandy came through.

He ignores you, and you still like him. He doesn't have to do anything, and you still fall for him. You miss him, but he's never once thought of you.

What is going on with her? I muttered aloud. By then, Gabriel had already come back out of the bathroom, glancing my way — though I still hadn't noticed he was there. I read the second text again, genuinely confused. Was this actually meant for me? I smiled to myself and shook my head.

My phone buzzed again.

It hurts to love someone and not be loved back. But it hurts even more to love someone and never find the courage to tell them.

My hand rose to my chest on its own. Why is this getting to me? I bit my lip, smiling faintly, and was already dialing her number when one more message came in.

Love is crying over him and still wanting him. It's being completely ignored and loving him anyway. It's watching him love someone else and still managing to smile and say "I'm happy for you," when all you actually want to do is cry. Hello?

I actually laughed out loud reading that last one.

"Hold on, I'm not crying!" I said, defending myself, because obviously I wasn't. "What did you just say?" By that point I sounded completely unhinged — talking to my phone as if it could talk back.

I finally just called her. Tried five times. She never picked up.

“Who are you calling at this hour?” I nearly dropped my phone hearing Gabriel’s voice. He was leaning against the closet door.

“Oh my God,” I said, startled. “How long have you been standing there?”

“A little over ten minutes.”

Ten minutes? How did I not notice him at all— My thoughts cut off as he spoke again.

“You seemed pretty absorbed in your phone. Who were you calling?” His tone had turned a shade more serious. He walked over, hands in his pockets, and sat down beside me on the bed.

Chapter 686

“It’s Sandy. I’ve been trying to reach her, but she doesn’t seem too interested in answering,” I said, gripping my phone tightly.

“And those texts you were sending — were those to her too?”

I looked at him, wanting to ask why do you want to know, but the seriousness in his expression made me let the question go.

“Yes,” I said simply, looking away. I didn’t want him picking up on why I was actually trying to reach her.

“Madi. Listen—”

Hearing my name pulled my eyes right back to his.

“Did you say anything to Nancy? Or my father, about our arrangement?”

I frowned, straightening up. “Of course not. I haven’t said a word to any of them. Why are you asking?”

“Because I think Dad might suspect something’s off with the act.”

“How would you even—I mean, how do you know that? Are you sure?” I turned to face him fully this time.

“I don’t. But I know my father. He wouldn’t give me advice like that unless—”

“What advice?” I asked, confused.

He went quiet. “Nothing. Just father-son stuff,” he said, letting out a sigh.

I didn't push it.

"Madi, we need to sell this better, in front of them."

My eyes went wide. What did he just say?

"What do you mean, sell it better?"

"We need to be sweeter with each other. Show them we're actually in love."

I laughed at that. It was funny, honestly — I felt like I was digging my own grave.

"Madi, I'm serious."

I stopped laughing immediately and sighed.

"Fine. Tell me what you want me to do," I said, matching his tone.

“Just follow my lead.”

“Huh?”

“I mean — do what I do. Hold me, whenever they’re around.”

“That’s literally what I’ve been doing. I already kissed you in front of Nancy, remember?”

“Yes, but we need to be more careful now. I think Dad might be onto us, or at least suspicious. So we need to put in more effort — be sweeter, look more in love.”

“Deal. But don’t touch me.” I raised an eyebrow, though he clearly didn’t catch my meaning.

“What do you mean, don’t touch you?”

“You can hug me, kiss me — nothing past that. You know exactly what I mean. None of that.”

“Sex? You mean sex?” he asked, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Yes. That,” I said, biting my lip. He smiled instantly.

“Don’t worry, my love, I won’t lay a finger on you — unless you want me to. Or you give me some kind of sign.”

“Ugh!” My eyes went wide, and when he laughed again, I grabbed a pillow and swung it straight at his face. He blocked the hits with his arms, still smiling with that easy, careless charm.

“I will never do that! How dare you even think it!” I kept swinging.

“Never say never, love.” He kept dodging every swing.

Chapter 687

We both ended up collapsed on the bed, laughing, worn out. I lay flat on my back, his right arm tucked beneath my head like a pillow. We let out matching sighs and smiled at each other. Neither of us said anything for a while — we just sat in the quiet. I was about to say something when he leaned over, kissed my forehead, and closed his eyes.

I sighed again, then smiled, watching him. It was the first time I’d seen him like this — worn out, but at peace. His lips were parted slightly. I had to stop myself from reaching out to touch his face. He looked beautiful, even asleep.

I wish I had some kind of magic to erase whatever’s still hurting him. But how can I, when he’s the one holding onto it so tightly? I sighed again, turning onto my side, his arm still cradling my head.

I thought back to Sandy's third and final text. The truth is, it's hard — dealing with new feelings for someone right in front of you and still somehow completely out of reach. You can't hold his hand. You can't call him yours. But you still keep him close, just to have him somewhere near. You still get to share a smile with him, even if he never knows what that smile actually costs you.

I gave a sad little smile and pressed a hand to my chest. It's hard to pretend you love someone you don't. But it's so much harder to pretend you don't love someone you actually do.

After that, I closed my eyes and hoped, somehow, that sleep would actually find me tonight.

Point of view of Madi

Oh, holy God, I hate mornings. I hate waking up early. I hate showering at the crack of dawn even more. But this time, I didn't have a choice.

The sound of water running through the shower reminded me, in an instant, that I wasn't in my own bed. I cracked open my left eye, then immediately shut it again.

Ugh, my God. Why does "morning" even have to exist? Why do we have to get up this early every single day? I muttered to myself, dragging myself out of bed, half-blind.

I scratched my head and forced myself upright. I knew my hair probably looked like a bird's nest, and honestly, I couldn't care less. I'd barely taken a step when I collided with something hard, slick, and wet.

“Ugh—” I shoved it away and forced my eyes fully open, genuinely irritated. The first thing that came into focus was my boss’s face, smiling right at me. I frowned when he didn’t move an inch.

“Good morning, my love. Sleep well?” His smile only widened at the sight of my rumpled, sleepy face.

I’d opened my mouth to answer when the fresh scent of apples hit me all at once.

A single drop of water slid down from his wet hair and landed on his shoulder. My eyes locked onto it, tracking its path down his bare chest, continuing over the lines of his stomach. My mouth went dry as it kept sliding, all the way down to the edge of the white towel knotted at his waist.

I choked, holding my breath as it dawned on me — that towel was the only thing he had on.

Chapter 688

“My God, Gabriel Wilsons!” I shoved him back, both hands landing flat on his bare chest.

“What? I’m not doing anything, darling.”

“Oh my God, why are you just standing here in a towel?” I asked, desperately trying not to let my eyes drift lower.

“Because I just got out of the shower. What am I supposed to wear? Or would you prefer nothing at all?” I let out a shriek as his hand moved toward the knot at his waist.

“For God’s sake, Gabriel!” I bolted into the bathroom, his laughter chasing me all the way before I slammed the door shut. “Ugh!”

I’d barely stepped inside before that apple scent of his flooded the room, wrapping around me completely.

I sighed, resigned. Just another day of this farce, I muttered to myself, peeling off my clothes. Thanks to the maid’s efficiency, everything I needed was already neatly laid out — my favorite aloe vera shampoo, my honey-vanilla soap, and matching lotion. I never bothered with conditioner. Why would I? I’d already established I hate mornings, and I definitely don’t have time for extra hair products when I’m perpetually running late.

“Hmm, perfect,” I murmured to myself after smoothing on my face cream. Shower done, I just needed to get dressed.

Damn it. Tsk, tsk, tsk. I shook my head, realizing I’d left my clothes outside.

Damn it.

I wrapped one towel around my body, then grabbed a second for my hair.

I cracked the door and peeked out, checking whether Gabriel was still in the room. Relieved to find it empty, I tiptoed toward the closet, where the maid had already arranged everything of mine across the shelves and drawers, alongside his.

“Why are you tiptoeing?” I nearly lost my balance, startled, as Gabriel suddenly pushed the door open. I clutched the edge of the towel tighter against my chest.

“Ever heard of knocking before you walk in?” I shot him a sharp look, but he just laughed.

“Why would I need to knock to get into my own room?” he said, strolling in without a shred of hesitation.

True. Why would he need to knock, entering his own room? What a mess. How dumb of me. I rolled my eyes and kept walking toward the closet, this time at a normal pace. He wasn’t wrong. It was his room, not mine.

“What should I wear?” I muttered to myself, scratching the back of my neck. “It’s a family picnic. Shorts, maybe? Or a dress?” I sighed, unable to decide, before finally settling on a nude summer dress and matching sandals. Elegant, casual — exactly the look I wanted. I’ve never quite figured out why I love that nude shade so much, but it always seems to suit my skin. I finished up with a swipe of mascara and a bit of gloss.

Back in the bedroom, I was surprised to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, phone in hand.

“You’re still here?” I checked my watch — 6:45 a.m.

"I'm waiting for you."

Chapter 689

"Huh? Why? I thought I heard your mom say yesterday that all the guys were supposed to head out early. Aren't you going with them?"

"I'll go. It's still early enough." He stood, sliding his phone into his back pocket.

I just shrugged. "Ready, then?" I asked, but he was already frowning at me.

"You're not bringing a purse?"

"Why would I? I've got my belt bag." I pointed to the small, discreet pouch strapped around my waist, holding my phone, a compact mirror, lip gloss, and powder.

"That thing's way too small."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. I already knew exactly where he was going with that. Why do men always have to stereotype like this?

“Tsk, tsk. My love,” he said, gently cupping my face with his free hand, “I’m not used to hauling around a bunch of clothes and makeup everywhere I go. Everything I need is right in here.” I lifted my little pouch proudly, showing it off with a smile. “My lovely, practical fanny pack — compact mirror, powder, lip gloss. That’s all I need.” I shrugged as I finished.

He took my hand, lacing his fingers through mine.

“No makeup bag? Nothing... feminine?” he asked, as if double-checking I truly had everything covered. His insistence made me laugh.

“Nope, none of that. Why — did she used to carry all that stuff around whenever you two went out?”

His expression turned serious.

Ah. Forbidden topic.

I bit the corner of my lip, realizing I’d asked something I probably shouldn’t have — but, miraculously, he actually answered.

“Yes.” He turned to look right at me. “She always brought a full bag of makeup and every feminine essential imaginable, whenever we traveled or went anywhere as a family.”

“Ah. I see.” That was all I could manage — I was too stunned that he’d actually answered a question about her, for once. I had so many more questions I wanted to ask, but I decided to hold off. One step at a time.

Gabriel stayed quiet, his expression serious, hand still laced with mine, all the way to the living room. I let out a breath, slipping back into character, and flashed a bright smile the moment I spotted Sav and Chris on the couch, absorbed in their toys.

“Good morning, little ones!” I greeted them cheerfully.

Both kids lit up the second they saw me and came running. I had to let go of Gabriel’s hand to crouch down and pull them both into a hug.

“Okay, okay, easy now!” I laughed at their overeager hugs and the sticky kisses landing on my cheeks.

“Good morning, Madi!” they shouted together.

“You look so pretty!” Chris said, beaming, before planting another kiss on my cheek.

“Hey! Stop kissing my girlfriend! She’s mine, all mine!”

I glanced at Gabriel’s mock-sulking face. I probably would’ve laughed out loud if I hadn’t remembered we were still supposed to be “acting.”

“Gab, he’s just a kid!” I said playfully. This was exactly the kind of thing we’d talked about the night before — being extra sweet, extra convincingly in love.

Chapter 690

“I know—” Gabriel started, but Chris cut him off, a bright grin spreading across his face.

“I was wrong, Madi. Sorry.” Gabriel and I both stared at him, stunned.

“What do you mean, Chris?” I asked, not following.

“Sorry, but you don’t look pretty.” My eyebrows shot up in disbelief, while Gabriel started walking away, a smile tugging at his lips.

“You look stunning. Absolutely radiant today,” he finished, pressing a kiss to my forehead, then one to each cheek.

I got the satisfaction of watching his triumphant smile collapse instantly into a scowl.

Sav and I burst out laughing at Chris’s comment, and the three of us ended up in a full fit of giggles when Gabriel turned to face us, mock-stern, growling playfully.

“Don’t you do that again, Christian Wilsons!” he said, pretending to be furious, which only made the boy laugh even harder.

“But why?” Chris asked, all innocence.

“Because she’s my girlfriend. She’s mine, not yours!”

I stood up, shaking my head, ignoring their ridiculous back-and-forth. I looked at Gabriel, eyebrows raised, silently questioning whether all this was really necessary.

Do we really need to keep this act up in front of a five-year-old? my look asked, and he nodded, clearly understanding exactly what I meant.

He came back over and took my hand.

“My love—” He never finished, because Chris interrupted him again.

“Fine, she’s all yours. But when I get my own girlfriend someday, I’m never letting you hug her or kiss her. I won’t even let you touch her!”

Gabriel and I exchanged an amused look, and I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing.

“Deal. Sounds fair to me,” Gabriel said, ruffling the boy’s hair. I could tell how hard he was fighting back a laugh of his own.

He pulled me toward the kitchen and stopped just a few steps from the door.

“Why’d we stop?” I asked, looking straight into his eyes.

“Remember what we talked about last night?” he murmured against my ear. I gripped my pouch a little tighter as his lips brushed my skin.

“Don’t worry, I remember,” I said, smiling, about to step forward when he suddenly pulled me into an unexpected hug. I almost asked why, but I didn’t need to — the reason became clear the instant I spotted his mother appearing in the kitchen doorway.

“Ah, good morning, my children!” she greeted us, beaming.

“Good morning, Mom,” we said at the same time — though mine came out without the “Mom” attached.

“Did you two sleep well?” The question carried a little too much weight, so I let Gabriel field this one.

"We slept fine," he answered simply.

Unconvinced, she pressed. "Just fine?"

"Mom!" He shot her a look, faintly annoyed.

"Alright, alright." She shrugged and turned, heading back into the kitchen.

I breathed a sigh of relief the moment she was out of sight. Gabriel smiled and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead.

"It'll be fine. Just stay close to me, okay?"