

A Favor 691

Chapter 691

I answered with a smile and a nod. A moment later, we made our way into the kitchen, his hand settling gently against my back, just above my waist.

Already on the way to the picnic, I rode in Nancy's car with Sav and Chris buckled into the back seat. Gabriel had gone ahead with the boys, heading straight to the lake after breakfast.

The kids and I were bobbing our heads along to Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling" on the radio when Nancy suddenly switched the station.

The new song was the kind that hit straight in the chest — something aching about two people who might have loved each other, if only the timing had been different. I switched it back before it even finished the first verse.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and caught both kids frowning at the back of their cousin's head. I sighed, trying to focus back on the music.

Why can't it be us, the song kept asking, over and over. I let out a long breath. Ah. It's never going to happen.

I leaned my head against the window, closing my eyes for a moment, and somehow Sandy drifted into my thoughts.

Right — I need to call her right now.

I pulled my phone out of my bag and scrolled to her contact, dialing without a second thought, even with company in the car. She picked up on the second ring.

“Madi,” she said, her voice flat, a little deflated.

“Where are you?” I asked, frowning.

“Home,” she said, offering nothing more.

“Okay... and why do you sound so down?”

She let out a sigh.

“Sandy?”

I was so caught up in the call that I didn’t even register we’d arrived at the picnic site until Nancy called my name.

“Little sister, mind if we head in and set up the tent first?”

“Of course, go ahead,” I said, nodding with a smile.

“And you?”

“I’ll be right behind you — just let me finish this call with my friend.” I smiled again.

“Alright,” she said, before shutting the door behind her.

The kids had already climbed out. Once everyone had cleared the car, I leaned back into my seat, trying to settle in.

“Sis? A tent? Where even are you?” Sandy asked, after a moment.

“I’m in Belleville.”

“B-Belleville? What — doing what there?” I could practically hear her brow furrowing through the phone.

“I’m with Gabriel’s parents. I mean — we’re at his parents’ house.”

“What?” Her voice jumped an octave. “What is going on, Madi? Why are you there, and what exactly were you doing with Mr. Wilsons?”

“Wait, wait, Sandy — I didn’t call you to get interrogated. I called to talk about you. I’ll explain everything about me later, promise. But what’s going on with you?”

She let out a heavy sigh.

“And Sandy — what was with those messages last night? Those heartbreak quotes. What’s actually going on behind them?”

“Oh, Madiii...” Her voice cracked, like she was on the verge of tears.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay? Is it a problem with your boyfriend—”

Chapter 692

“I’m in love, Madi!” she blurted out, cutting me off.

“Huh? You’re in love?” I couldn’t help but smile. “Sandy, are you kidding me? What’s the issue — you and your boyfriend just hit your three-month mark—”

“It’s not him! I mean — I am in love, Madi, just not with him.”

“What do you mean, you’re in love but not with your boyfriend? What happened, Sandy? He’s your boyfriend — logically he should be the one you’re in love with!”

“I know that! That’s exactly the problem. He’s my boyfriend, and I still don’t love him. I’m in love with someone else. I couldn’t help it. I just fell for someone else.”

“Oh my God, Sandy.” I pressed a hand to my chest. “Can you at least tell me who?”

She hesitated, sighed, then finally answered — and it floored me.

“Troy. I’m in love with Troy, Madi.”

My eyes went wide instantly. If there’s a level past shocked, that’s exactly what I was.

“What?” I nearly screamed into the car, not even noticing Gabriel rushing over after he saw me clutch my chest — he had no idea it was just an ordinary phone call with his secretary. “Are you actually in love with him? How did this happen? I mean — when did this happen?”

“I don’t know, Madi. I just woke up one day and realized I was in love with him.”

“I don’t even know what to say, Sandy.” I sighed. “So what’s your plan now?”

“Nothing,” she laughed on the other end — though I knew that laugh wasn’t her usual one.

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“I mean exactly that — nothing. What am I supposed to do? He’s in love with someone else. And the worst part is, that someone is you.”

“Sandy—”

Someone tapped on the car window. I looked up to find Gabriel, brow furrowed, worry written across his face. The moment I unlocked the door, I could see it clearly in his eyes.

“Love, what happened?”

I couldn’t answer — and by then, Sandy had clearly heard his voice through the phone.

“Love? Madi, is this serious?” Sandy’s question came right as Gabriel repeated his own.

“Love, is everything okay? What happened? Who are you talking to?” He was scanning my face, my arms, looking for something wrong. As confused as I was by his sudden concern, I couldn’t get a word out — I was too busy listening to Sandy on the other end.

“Wow — love, huh? Really pulling out all the stops to impress his family?”

“Love?”

“Oh — oh, Madi, I’m warning you. Whatever you’re doing right now might be the start of something that ends badly for you.”

My thoughts stalled completely at that. I looked up at Gabriel, still watching me, his eyes full of questions. It’s too late, Sandy, I wanted to say. I’m already in love with him.

“Love, who is it?”

“Madi, remember — he still hasn’t gotten over his ex.”

“Love?”

Chapter 693

“Oh my God, can everyone ask me one question at a time?” I shouted, frustration boiling over, catching Gabriel’s stunned expression while Sandy was still going on the line.

“It’s fine, love, I’m just talking to Sandy,” I said, exhaling, turning back to the phone. “Sandy, can I call you back later?”

“Oh my God, you’re seriously choosing your boyfriend over me right now—”

“Sandy! Enough!” I cut her off.

“We’ve been over this so many times, haven’t we? Sandy, please. Don’t do this, okay?”

“Fine, fine!”

“I’ll call you later, just have your phone on you!”

“Okay. What time?” she asked, still a bit sulky.

“After lunch?” I bit my lip, not entirely sure I’d actually be free to call at that hour.

“Madi, promise me — after lunch. I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay, I promise,” I sighed.

“Alright. Talk soon.”

She hung up, and I finally had to face Gabriel, serious and stern.

“Was that Mrs. Aguilar?”

“Yes, it was,” I said, tucking my phone back into my bag. I reached for my seatbelt, but he beat me to it, unbuckling it for me. I just watched him until he offered me his hand.

I took it, firm, and stepped out of the car.

“Why’d she call?” he asked as we walked toward the family’s four-by-four tent, his hand resting lightly against the small of my back. “Something about work?”

“No, nothing work-related. Actually, I called her.” Since he hadn’t asked directly, I took the chance to explain. “I’d been trying to reach her since last night, but you know how it is — she wasn’t picking up.”

“Okay,” he nodded. As we drew closer to his family, he pulled me in and whispered quickly in my ear.

“Just act natural, alright?” I looked at him and nodded. He took a breath, pressed a kiss to my forehead, and together we put on our most convincingly forced smiles.

“Guess what, everyone!” Aunt Cindy shouted, practically bouncing with excitement.

All of us turned toward her at once. We’d just sat down, about to start eating.

“What is it?” Uncle John asked his wife.

Her smile only grew wider.

“Can anyone guess who made the chicken with pesto and cheese, and the vegetable spaghetti, for lunch today?” The boys exchanged glances, and Gabriel, beside me, called out his answer first.

“Has to be Nancy, Aunt Cindy.”

He said it loud, grinning, and the rest of the boys burst out laughing.

Nancy just raised an eyebrow and shot me a wink, completely unbothered by her brother's jab.

"No, Gabriel — you know perfectly well Nancy can't cook, why would you even say that?" Nancy and I laughed at him together. He shot her a look, dripping with irony.

Since the boys had been out at the lake since early morning, none of them had a clue how to answer Aunt Cindy's question.

"So who was it, then?" Philip asked, equally confused and curious.

"Someone else—" She didn't finish before Justine cut in.

"Was it you?"

Chapter 694

"No. It was Madi. She went out of her way to make us this incredible lunch," she said, clapping her hands. Every head in the group swiveled toward me.

"Wow! You made all of this, Madi?" I bit my lip and smiled at Uncle John.

“Yes. And she also baked an amazing chocolate liqueur cake,” Aunt Cindy proudly added on my behalf.

“Incredible! You can cook, Madi?” Mr. Wilsons asked.

“Yes, Dad,” I said, a little self-conscious.

I could feel every eye in the group on me, but there was one particular pair that had my hands going clammy — the one sitting right beside me.

He took my hand under the table, and I turned to him. He was smiling at me in a way that stopped my breath. I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could, he cupped my face in both hands and kissed me — right there, in front of everyone.

He bit gently at my lower lip when I hesitated, and I kissed him back, one hand curling around his waist, the other resting over his hand against my cheek.

When he pulled back slightly, that same smile was still on his lips — proud, unmistakably proud.

“I love you.”

My breath caught at those three words. Why does it feel real? Why did some part of me want to believe it was? Or was that just my heart, hoping for something it had no business hoping for?

“I love you too, darling,” I said, returning the smile — a smile that wasn’t fake, wasn’t part of the act. It came from somewhere real.

He kissed me again, and everyone around us watched, clapping, a few of the kids even whistling. I thought that would be the end of it. I was wrong. He suddenly stood, kissed my forehead, and walked over to a microphone set up nearby — the family, it turned out, always brought sound equipment for these gatherings, since music mattered that much to them.

We all watched as he stopped in front of the group, microphone in hand, and began to speak. For a moment, I was confused — until I remembered what we’d discussed just before arriving.

“I’ve thought about this. Caught myself thinking about it, over and over.”

He looked out at everyone gathered around. My lips had gone suddenly dry, and I wet them without thinking.

“I’ve been through real hell, and I know all of you have seen it — even Savahna and Christian.”

He paused, a small smile crossing his face. Every eye stayed locked on him, waiting.

“I’ve always wanted a new start. A clean chapter. But I don’t think I could’ve gotten there without this woman. Without having her right here, beside me.” He looked at me then, and my heart started

pounding hard enough that it felt like it might leap straight out of my chest. “This woman who’s stood by me, who taught me what a second chance actually means. She built a whole new version of me.”

Chapter 695

I nodded along as he spoke, eyes closing for a moment. I wish every word of that were true — that it was really meant for me. But it wasn’t. It was a lie, delivered to a room full of people who genuinely believed he’d become someone new — someone ready for a fresh start with me — when the truth was much simpler: he was doing all of this for one person, one purpose. To win her back.

“I want you all to know how grateful I am to whatever brought her into my life. I’m so lucky — to love someone like her, and to be loved back.”

I bit my lip as a single tear slipped down my cheek. Then another. And another, until I couldn’t hold them back anymore. Everyone watching assumed they were tears of joy. Part of that was true. The other part was something closer to hurt, and clarity, and grief, all tangled together.

He walked over, pulled me to my feet, and drew me in front of everyone, still holding my hand.

“Madielyn Davis. I want you to know exactly how much I love you, and how much everything we’ve shared has meant to me. I want you in my life — completely. Forever.”

I choked back a sob as he dropped to one knee, pulling a small red box from his back pocket.

“I really tried to think of the right way to say this. Something romantic — a poem, maybe, or even a song, since I know you love music too. But nothing quite fit. So I’ll just say it plainly: Madielyn Davis, my

love — I love you with everything I have. You make me happy in a way I didn't think was possible. You complete me. And I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?" He opened the box, revealing a ring with a large white diamond set at its center.

No matter how many times I tried to swallow the lump rising in my throat, I couldn't stop the tears. This is the next level. Was I really ready for this? Was I truly willing to take this step for him — to become his wife, just to keep the plan alive? Or was this the moment I needed to end it, once and for all?

By then, the whole group was already shouting yes, yes, please. I looked at each of them, one by one, before finally turning back to Gabriel. His expression carried a silent plea, waiting for me to play along. I swallowed hard.

"Yes. I'll marry you."

He slipped the ring onto my finger and jumped to his feet, grabbing me by the waist to spin me around, laughing and shouting "yes" and "thank you" all at once. When he set me back down, he wiped away the tears of pain and sorrow still clinging to my face.

He pulled me into a tight hug and kissed me again — but this time I didn't wait for him to bite at my lips. I kissed him back the moment our mouths met. I kissed him like I'd never felt a shred of pain. I gave him, and everyone watching, exactly the kind of joy a proposal was supposed to look like.

"Thank you, my love." He pulled back, kissing my forehead.

I nodded and smiled up at him.

Chapter 696

"I love you," he said, staring into my eyes, cupping my cheeks in his hands.

There it is again. That look — like he was silently pleading with me. And my foolish heart melted, instantly, just from that.

"I love you too," I said, biting my lip as one more stubborn tear slipped from my left eye. He pulled me into another embrace.

When I finally glanced back at the table, everyone was still clapping. I smiled at them, but my brow furrowed the moment my eyes landed on Nancy. She was smiling too, watching her brother soak in the congratulations — but something about her smile didn't quite carry real warmth. She hadn't noticed me watching yet.

The moment she did, she came straight over, smiling, and pulled me into a tight hug.

"Thank you, Madi."

I swallowed hard at that. She reached up and wiped away the last trace of a dried tear from under my left eye, smiling again.

"You really do love my brother. I can see it in your eyes." My breath caught in my throat.

“Are you a mind reader now?” I joked, weakly.

“No — just a reader of eyes and emotions, Madi.” I was speechless, caught off guard by how serious she looked. “Kidding!” she added a moment later, and God knows how relieved I was, hearing that.

“It’s obvious, honestly — I can see it in your eyes, in your tears. Those were happy tears, weren’t they?”

“Huh — ah — yes. Happy tears.” I glanced at Gabriel. “And love for your brother.” I looked back at her.

She smiled. “I know.”

His aunts and cousins came over to congratulate me too. Aunt Cindy pulled me into a tight hug, holding my face gently in her hands.

“Thank you, Madi.” I just smiled at her. A moment later, Gabriel’s parents stepped forward. Mrs. Wilsons’s eyes still glistened with tears as she embraced me.

“Oh, my dear Madi. Thank you for coming into my son’s life. For bringing his smile back. For being his ray of sunshine.”

“Mom — you don’t need to thank me. I just love your son, and his happiness is mine too.”

She hugged me again.

Then Mr. Wilsons took me by the shoulders. “Madi — thank you for loving my son, and accepting him, rough edges and all.” We all laughed at that. “But truly — thank you for helping him find himself again.”

“You’re welcome, Dad.” I smiled, and he hugged me back.

“Ahem.” Every head turned toward Gabriel, standing behind his father. “May I finally talk to, hug, and kiss my fiancée?” he asked, drawing out the word for emphasis.

Everyone stepped aside as he made his way over. I scratched at the side of my neck, watching him approach.

“Hi, my love.” My eyebrows went up despite myself, my foolish heart doing a small flip even though I knew perfectly well none of this was real. His hands settled at my waist, and I gasped a little as he pulled me in gently.

Chapter 697

He leaned in, lips brushing mine, and murmured, “Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome, darling. But I’m starving. I genuinely cannot keep kissing you back while my stomach is over here screaming at me — Madi. Feed me.”

That got a laugh out of everyone. Yes, I let myself say it all as a joke, if only so I could tell myself later that everything was fine, that everything would work out, just smile through it. Because I was Madi. And you already know what that means. The always confident, always strong, always beautiful Madi.

“Alright, what are we waiting for — let’s eat. Gabriel, serve your fiancée whatever she wants.” His mother winked at me.

“Of course, Mom.” He smiled, guiding me back to my seat.

He pulled out my chair, letting me sit first. I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow, thinking back to our first “conversation” at my restaurant — when he hadn’t bothered pulling out my chair at all, just ordered me to sit. The complete opposite of this. Still, just like his mother, he winked at me too. He settled in beside me, a smile that never seemed to leave his face, and started piling nearly every dish on the table onto my plate. By the time I registered it, my jaw had nearly hit the table.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing?” I asked, frowning.

“Serving you food. Oh — sorry.” So does that mean he genuinely didn’t realize what he was doing?

That earned him a round of laughter from everyone at the table, but I just shook my head.

“Gabriel, I said serve your fiancée — I didn’t say bury her in food!” Mrs. Wilsons shot her son a look, and his cousins burst out laughing, myself included.

I helped move some of the food back off my plate and onto his.

We were finally about to eat when a black Maserati pulled up right beside Nancy’s car. No tinted windows, so we could all see exactly who was inside. A smile crept onto my face the moment I recognized the driver. Greg. But — what was he doing here?

“Gregy!” Nancy shouted, delighted, and took off running toward her cousin.

I glanced at Gabriel — his expression had gone completely serious. Wasn’t he happy his cousin had stopped by?

Greg and Nancy hugged and made their way toward the tent. Gabriel’s mother wrapped him in a tight hug.

“I’ve missed you, Greg. How’s Cynthia? I miss her too.” She smiled — I remembered that was Greg’s mother’s name.

“She’s doing great, Auntie. Misses you too,” Greg said, his dimple appearing as he smiled.

“Greg!” Gabriel’s father pulled him into a hug next, followed by every other boy at the table. Greg clearly had deep roots with this family.

“Gabriel!”

Greg greeted him, and I watched Gabriel’s expression stay flat — calm, serious, no real reaction at all. I couldn’t help but wonder — were the two of them close, or was there something unresolved between them?

“Greg.” Gabriel stood and shook his hand.

Chapter 698

Then Greg turned to me.

“Hello, Madi.” He smiled, and I smiled back.

“Hello, Greg.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek.

Too busy smiling at him, I completely missed the sharp look Gabriel shot his cousin.

“How are you?” he asked me again.

"I'm good. You?"

"Doing great too," he said, flashing me a boyish grin.

"You two know each other?" Mr. Wilsons asked, glancing between us. I was about to answer when Greg beat me to it.

"Yes, Uncle Jonas. We met at WEC — she's Gabriel's assistant." He said it looking straight at me instead of his uncle. I frowned slightly at that, but he just smiled and winked back at me.

Ahh. Right. Maybe this was his way of keeping his promise, holding onto the secret.

"I see — makes sense you two would know each other so well," Mr. Wilsons said, nodding.

"Alright, enough of that — you can catch up later. Let's eat," Mrs. Wilsons said, waving everyone back toward the table.

"Greg, there's an empty seat here." Nancy called him over, right across from me, and he happily took it.

I was caught completely off guard when Gabriel suddenly pulled me in and kissed me — not some quick peck, but a deep, deliberate kiss. What is he doing? When he finally pulled back, he shot Greg a distinctly mischievous smile across the table.

“Whoa — what was that?” Greg asked, startled, eyes flicking between the two of us.

“They’re engaged,” Nancy answered for him.

“Ahh — wow.” He said it like he couldn’t quite believe what he’d just heard.

And the man beside me — kissed me again, out of nowhere, reaching under the table for my hand and bringing it up to his lips. The diamond on my finger caught the light, and I watched it catch Greg’s eye too.

After lunch, I noticed Gabriel’s phone ringing. My heart froze the moment I saw the name and photo lighting up the screen. Stacey. I looked away quickly, catching Greg’s eyes on me as I did. I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“Love, I’ll be right back — need to take this,” Gabriel said, kissing my forehead. I just nodded as he walked off, maybe ten meters away. In another situation, I might have asked why he needed to take the call so far from everyone else. Ten meters, exactly.

I sighed, glancing over at Greg, who was watching Gabriel closely. Five minutes had passed and he was still on the phone. When everyone stood up to start singing, I got up too and told Nancy I wanted to take a walk near the lake.

I checked my phone for messages or missed calls, since I'd switched it to silent before leaving the car earlier. Nothing. I sighed and looked at my own reflection in the water. I nearly jumped out of my skin when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned to find Greg, smiling apologetically.

Chapter 699

"Sorry. Remember — I already told you, too much coffee's bad for you."

I laughed. He used to say that all the time back in college, whenever he caught me with a cup in hand, insisting it just fed my anxiety.

"So — does this mean you're engaged?" he asked, after a beat.

"Ahh, Greg." I wasn't sure how to explain it to him — or if I even needed to.

"I know everything, Madi." I swallowed hard at that.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a little thrown.

"I know everything — the agreement, the contract, the engagement, all of it. Your whole charade."

“I — I — how do you know about this?”

“Because Gabriel told me. He’s my best friend too, Madi.”

“Ah.”

“But don’t worry, I get it. And your secret’s safe with me.” He winked, and I managed a small smile.

“So you know everything,” I said, letting out a long breath. Not a question — a statement.

“Yeah.” He laughed briefly before his expression turned more serious. “There’s just one thing I still don’t get. Why’d you agree to this deal in the first place?”

“Greg, I—”

“Greg!”

My words vanished as we both turned toward Gabriel, storming over, face like thunder.

“Gabriel.” Greg smiled at him, but he didn’t return it. He walked straight to me instead, his hand settling possessively against my back. Greg just raised an eyebrow at him.

“Love, what are you doing over here?” he asked, brow twitching with unease.

I was thrown off. Greg had just told me he knew everything — so why was Gabriel still putting on this act in front of him?

“Gabriel, you don’t have to do this with him. He already knows. He knows about the whole thing,” I said, looking straight into his eyes. He didn’t answer — just tightened his grip on my waist.

“Time to head back,” he murmured.

“Ah—” I just shook my head.

Greg’s point of view

I followed Gabriel into the mini-bar set up inside the house, sliding onto the mahogany stool beside him.

He glanced at me for a second before turning his attention back to his drink.

“So — engaged now, huh?” I asked, pouring myself a glass of whatever he was having.

“What are you even doing here? How’d you know I’d be here?”

“Went by your place. Your maid told me you’d flown out to Belleville, and since I’ve been missing your parents — and Nancy — I figured I’d swing by. Why? Not happy to see your own cousin?”

He ignored that, taking another sip. I gave him a suspicious look and shook my head.

“Actually, I think I know exactly why you’re not thrilled to see me.” I took another drink, watching him turn my way. “It’s about her. About Madi.”

“Drop it, Greg,” he said, low but sharp, and I just laughed.

“Drop what, exactly? I’m not doing anything.”

“Stop flirting with Madi. She’s my fiancée now.”

Chapter 700

I swallowed my drink before letting out another laugh. “Fiancée? I thought this whole thing was just an act.”

“It is. All of it’s an act. Doesn’t mean I want to watch you flirt with her.”

“Flirting? Are you being serious right now, Gabriel? I wasn’t flirting. She’s just a friend.”

“You were. Because you actually like her.”

“And why would I tell you that?” I honestly wanted to laugh at how he sounded — like an actual, jealous boyfriend. Jealous of his own cousin.

“No — I saw the way you were looking at her earlier!”

I laughed again. “Why does that even bother you, Gabriel? Why does the way I look at her get under your skin like this? Unless — are you jealous?”

“Of course not.” He looked away instantly.

“Then why are you acting so possessive over her? Let me remind you of something, Gabriel — this is an act. Sure, she’s your fiancée. On paper. That’s not reality.”

“Just stay away from her.”

“Hm. And if I don’t?” I said it just to push his buttons.

“I’m dead serious, Greg.”

“So am I. I already told you — I like her.”

“That’s ridiculous, Greg. You met her once and suddenly you’re in love?”

I smiled, watching his jaw tighten. “What if I told you I’ve actually known her for almost eight years — not just met her once, like you think?” I kept that thought to myself, though.

“And what if I told you — yes, it really was love at first sight, and I really do love her, not just admire her from a distance?” That part was true. I’d fallen for her the very first day of our college cooking class.

“Oh, come on, that’s such a cliché, Greg. Got anything better?”

“It’s the absolute truth. I’ve loved her since the day I met her.” That much I could say honestly — the rest, I had to keep back, for Madi’s sake.

“I’m warning you, Greg. Stay away from her.” He finished off his drink.

“And I’m warning you, buddy — don’t you dare fall for her. She’s already mine, and I’ll wait for her until your little deal runs its course.” I smiled at him.

He raised an eyebrow and looked away from my smile.

“You really think you’re going to wait around for her until this is over? Get comfortable, because you might be waiting forever.” With that, he got up and left me sitting alone at the bar, stunned.

I ended up laughing to myself once he was gone. You’re not going to fall for her — sure, sure. Already growing claws over her, aren’t you? She’s not even supposed to be your type, and here you are, acting like some jealous, possessive fool. You’re a selfish man, Gabriel. Selfish.

Madi’s point of view

I saw Gabriel walking out from the bar right as Aunt Morgan hit me with a question I never saw coming.

“Madi, how many boyfriends did you have before Gabriel?”

I hesitated, caught completely off guard by how blunt the question was.