

A Favor 731

Chapter 731

“Gabriel, let me remind you of something. Yes, we’re married—but only on paper. That doesn’t mean I need your permission every time I want to do something, just like I don’t expect you to ask for mine. I don’t interrogate you every time you go somewhere, or demand to know who you’re spending your time with. Please, just let me do what I want. I didn’t stop being a person the moment I said yes to you.”

“Madi, I was just worried. I was genuinely concerned when I couldn’t find you at home earlier today. I tried calling you so many times, and you never answered.”

“Hmm. Guess I’ve got a real talent for giving the gift of my absence to people who don’t even appreciate my presence.”

I gave him a wry smile, patting his cheek gently, then turned and continued up the stairs. I caught the way his jaw dropped at those last words. I had every bottle of beer I’d drunk that night to thank for the strength and nerve to stand up to him like that. If I’d known alcohol could do that for me, I might just start mixing it into my water every morning. This fake marriage of mine was turning out to be quite the test of courage.

“Madi!” I heard him call after me as I reached my door. “Let’s talk about this tomorrow, when you’re sober.”

“I’m not drunk, Gabriel. But if you want to ‘talk’ again tomorrow, that’s fine.”

“Goodnight, Gab.” I stepped up to him and gave him a small goodnight kiss on the cheek.

I closed the door behind me and let my back sink against it, eyes closed, replaying the night's events. Sandy had been wrong—so wrong—when she'd told me he'd love the outfit. A bitter smile crossed my face as I kicked off my shoes and tossed my bag onto the couch. He hadn't even noticed the dress I was wearing.

Damn it. I collapsed face-down onto the bed, utterly dejected. Less than a minute later, my phone buzzed with a text.

"Oh my God," I grumbled, sitting up to fish my phone out of my bag. It was a message from Greg.

Just got home. Goodnight, Madi.

I smiled at the short message and quickly typed back a reply.

Goodnight, Greg.

Then I threw myself back onto the bed.

I was still deep in the realm of dreams when the cursed sound of my alarm clock dragged me back to reality. It was Saturday morning, and that noisy little rectangle on the nightstand was quick to remind me of everything that had happened the night before. I also realized I was still wearing Sandy's red dress.

Damn it. Couldn't I have just slept in for four more hours? Seriously—how did I forget to set you last night? I muttered at my alarm clock, slapping the button to silence it before trying to drift back to sleep.

It was 8:30 a.m. when persistent knocking started at my door, along with someone calling my name from the hallway.

For heaven's sake. Can't I just sleep a little longer?

"Mrs. Madi! Mrs. Madi!" It was Elsa's voice, calling insistently.

Her persistence left me no choice but to drag myself up and open the door.

"Hi," I greeted her with a faint smile, my eyes barely open. Elsa gasped at the sight of me.

Chapter 732

"What happened to you, Mrs. Madi?" she asked, eyes wide with surprise. I could guess she meant the state of my makeup and hair, especially the mascara no doubt smudged under my eyes.

"It's just makeup, silly." I laughed and swung the door open wide.

“Ahh,” she said, nodding in understanding. “Um—Mrs. Madi, Mr. Gabriel asked me to tell you he’s waiting for you in the kitchen.”

I furrowed my brows, walking back to sit on the edge of the bed. “Why?”

“For breakfast. He made breakfast for the two of you,” she explained, smiling.

“He made breakfast?” I asked, barely believing it. In that instant, every trace of sleep vanished from my body.

“Yes, he did,” Elsa said, her voice bubbling with excitement, a broad smile spreading across her face.

“Okay. Just tell him to wait for me—forever.”

“What?”

“I’m only joking.” I smiled at her and got up. “Tell him I’ll be down in a minute. Thank you, Elsa.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Madi,” she said, before slipping out of the room.

A smile found its way onto my lips. Come on, Madi. He just made breakfast. What's so special about that? I stood in front of the mirror. And why am I smiling like this? And yet, my heart insisted on feeling this ridiculous flutter of excitement, just from knowing he'd made breakfast. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair, since I don't usually bother showering this early.

I hurried downstairs, heading straight for the kitchen, where I found him typing away on his laptop, phone resting beside it. He stood up the moment he saw me walk in.

"Good morning! Did you sleep well?" he asked with a smile, leaning in to kiss my forehead.

I made a real effort not to raise my eyebrows in surprise at his behavior. Was he really going to pretend nothing had happened last night?

"Good morning," I said, smiling despite myself. Ever since I'd realized I loved him, my heart and my reason had been locked in constant battle, and I could never quite tell which one to follow. This morning, my heart was practically singing just because he'd made breakfast, while my reason urged caution. And, as always, my foolish heart won.

"I made breakfast for you. There are scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes. I made orange juice too. What do you want?" He pulled out a chair for me, and I couldn't help but smile. It was the first time we'd ever had breakfast together.

"Did you make all this yourself?"

"I did—with a little help from Lea," he said, giving an awkward smile and scratching the back of his neck as he sat down beside me.

“Hmm... looks good,” I said, nodding, reaching for the pancakes before he stopped me.

“Let me serve you.” He gently took the fork from my hand and set three pancakes on my plate. I gave him a smile and said nothing. Enjoy this moment.

“Madi,” he said, after a moment of silence.

“Hmm?” I looked up after my fourth bite of pancake.

Chapter 733

“I’m sorry for what happened last night. I was just worried about you. I was afraid something bad might have happened. I called everyone close to you—Sandy, Nancy. Neither of them answered, and no one else seemed to know where you were. Eventually I woke up my private investigator to track you down. That’s exactly when you walked in. So I apologized and sent him back to bed.”

I was speechless. He’d done all that? Just out of worry? I truly hadn’t realized how much I’d worried him the night before. I took a sip of orange juice before looking at him.

“Sorry. I had no idea you were that worried.”

He gave me a smile and took my hand. "It's okay. I'm sorry too, for yelling at you last night. I thought about what you said, and you were right. I dragged you into this mess—I don't have the right to question you."

"Gab, that's not what I meant."

"No, Madi, I understand. We got married because of my deal. We're not really husband and wife, not really a couple. I never once asked your permission before I left, or told you where I'd been, these past days and nights. You were right about that too. But Madi, I need you to understand me."

Wow. "Understand" — such a heavy word.

"It's not because I'm your boss, or your husband. It's because I'm your friend—that's why I worry about you, Madi. I'm a man, I can take care of myself. But it's different for you. You're a woman."

"So you're saying I'm weak?"

"No! That's not what I meant. Madi, I care about you. I know you can't always see it, but I care, because I consider you my friend."

Ouch. That one hurt. One more heavy word: friend.

“Greg was with me. He could’ve protected me if it had come to that. Besides, he’s my friend too, same as you.”

“Tsk. Madi, he can’t protect you twenty-four hours a day. He’s not a superhero.”

“And can you? Can you protect me twenty-four hours a day, Gabriel?”

“Madi, please don’t argue with me on this. If you want, from now on, I’ll tell you all my plans and where I’m going. I’m just asking you to promise you’ll always tell me where you are too.”

“Why? I never asked that of you.”

“I know. But tell me anyway, so I can come get you if you can’t drive. I can go with you whenever you go out.”

I laughed and pulled my hand from his. “Are you sure about that? What’s your alcohol tolerance, Gab?” I asked, standing up, finishing the last of my orange juice.

“I don’t know—I think I could survive an entire bottle of whiskey. But why are you asking me that?” he said, puzzled.

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“Hmm, okay, let’s see. In that case, I’m pretty sure I’d be the one dragging you home, not the other way around.” I laughed, gathering the used plates from the table.

“Okay!” he said, but I’d already turned my back to head toward the sink. I carefully set the dirty dishes down. After a moment of silence, Gabriel’s next words stopped me cold.

“Let’s go out tonight. I mean—would you come to a party with me tonight?”

I turned and looked him in the eye. “Are you inviting me to a party with you tonight?” I asked, pointing at myself.

“I am. It’s a party for one of my college friends, celebrating his sixth wedding anniversary.”

He’s asking me out, my heart screamed inside my chest.

“Huh...” A faint smile touched my lips, and I nodded.

“Stacey will be there too, so we’ll need to look like a happy couple.”

In an instant, he wiped the smile clean off my face and left my jaw hanging.

A pained, sarcastic smile replaced the joy from a moment before. "So you're only inviting me because Stacey's going to be there?" I asked, forcing down the lump rising in my throat.

"Yes. But that's part of our agreement, isn't it?"

Ahh. My heart tightened, pain flooding my chest. "Of course. It's part of the deal, yes. Tsk, tsk. How could I forget?" I shook my head and turned back to the sink.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Of course it's part of the deal. What did you think it was? Did you really think he was asking you on a real date, a romantic one? He only sees you as a friend. Wake up, Madi.

"Madi, if this is a problem for you, that's fine. I understand. I can—"

"No!" I spun back around immediately. "Why would this be a problem for me? Of course I'll go with you."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. One hundred percent sure. It's part of what we agreed on, right? So I'm going," I said, putting on my best show of confidence and resolve.

"Thank you, Madi." He smiled at me, and I smiled back. Another smile, trying hard to pass as something other than what it really was—full of disappointment and hurt.

“No problem. Just tell me when you want to leave, so I can get ready and look beautiful.”

He chuckled at that. “Trust me, you don’t need to try. You’re already beautiful just the way you are, Madi. That’s enough.”

I just smiled at him. Yes, I know I’m pretty. I’m just not pretty enough for you to actually see me, and love me the way I wanted you to.

The End.