



# A Baby Surprise For My Billionaire Boss

**Author:** *Holly Rayner*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** She sought a new start under the billionaire's roof, Little did she know, she'd be starting a new life entirely...

Maddie Foster didn't set out to be a nanny, but when the opportunity arose to be a live-in nanny to a billionaire, she grabbed it with both hands. It's not long before she forms a bond with his adorable son Charlie, and Eli, the seemingly cold workaholic, reveals himself to be a much more complicated, and problematically enticing prospect than he first appeared.

Maddie tries to tell herself that she definitely isn't crushing on her new boss; that he doesn't have time for his son, never mind a relationship, because giving into temptation, that wouldn't be professional at all...

Eli Sinclair is one of the most successful men in the country. Unfortunately, he's so devoted to his work that real life is slipping through his fingers, and he soon realizes he's crushing on the new nanny...

Maddie's already made herself indispensable, and the last thing Eli wants to do is jeopardize the only stable presence in his son's life. He tells himself he can control it. But sometimes, giving in to temptation is a risk worth taking...

It's not long before things get dangerously complicated, And just as Maddie starts to wonder if leaving might be the best thing for all of them, She gets a surprise that will change everything...

**Total Pages (Source):** 59

## CHAPTER 1

ELI

“Today’s going to be my last day.”

Eli Sinclair stared at his live-in nanny. He had just walked in the door. He hadn’t even put down his briefcase yet, and she was hitting him with this. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Katie said. “I can’t take it. The long hours, the never knowing when I’m going to be done for the day... This wasn’t what we discussed when you hired me.”

“We talked about you living in and caring for Charlie when I was at work,” Eli said. “We agreed that your time would be your own whenever I was at home.”

“But I never know when that’s going to be,” Katie said. “You told me you worked eight to six most days.”

“I do.”

“Look at the clock,” she said.

Eli glanced at the clock over the kitchen stove. It was ten forty-five at night. He sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Things have been so busy lately.”

“It’s not lately. It’s been every night for six weeks. And I haven’t had a day off in over a month. I have no life of my own at this point,” Katie said. “I haven’t seen my boyfriend in weeks. I haven’t been out with my friends in ages. By the time you get home, it’s too late for me to do anything for myself — especially because I know you’re going to be leaving early in the morning to go back to work, so I can’t ever sleep in. Because you work such long hours, I’m forced to work long hours too, and I can’t do it anymore.”

“So you’re leaving just like that? You’re not even going to give me two weeks’ notice?”

“I can’t,” Katie said. “I can’t do this anymore. I’m sorry. I know this leaves you and Charlie in a bind. That’s not my intent. But I’m burnt out, Eli. I can’t keep living like this.”

“Have you thought about what it’s going to do to Charlie to lose you? He adores you, you know.”

“Please don’t make this harder than it has to be.” Katie sighed. “I adore Charlie too. He’s such a sweet kid. But... Eli, I’m not the one he needs. You’re his father, and you’re never home. In ten years, do you think he’s going to feel the lack of the nanny he knew for six months? Or do you think he’s going to wonder why his dad was never around?”

Eli simmered. The fact that she had the nerve to criticize his parenting while she was in the middle of quitting her job and leaving them high and dry was maddening. “Don’t worry about my relationship with Charlie,” he said. “If you really are leaving us, that’s no longer your concern.”

Katie nodded. “You’re right,” she said. “I just couldn’t leave in good conscience without saying it.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad you cleared your conscience.” He rubbed a hand across his face. “Look, Katie, don’t do this to us right now. We need you. We both need you. If it’s about the money, we can talk. Do you feel like you’re not being fairly compensated? I can increase your pay.” Hell, he’d double her pay if it would make her stay. He hadn’t realized until this moment just how much he depended on her, and how dire things were going to get for him and for Charlie if she was gone.

But Katie shook her head. “It’s not the money,” she said. “The problem is the schedule. If you could tell me — and make me believe — that things would change on that front, I’d reconsider. But the truth is, even if you promised me right now that you’d be home at five p.m. on the dot every evening, I don’t think I would believe it. I don’t think you’re capable of limiting your work hours. And you have to make your own choices for yourself and your family — that’s your business. But I can’t keep going like this. I have to prioritize the life I want to have, and working for you makes it impossible to have any work-life balance. I can’t take it anymore.”

“So you’re just going to leave. You won’t even finish out the week?”

“My boyfriend came by earlier and picked up most of my things,” Katie said. “I’m already moved out. He’ll be back in an hour for me. I just wanted to make sure I took the time to have this conversation with you before I left.”

“Oh, well that was considerate of you.”

Katie ignored his sarcasm. “I already said goodbye to Charlie,” she said quietly.

“You told him before you told me?”

“I had to,” she said. “He was going to bed. It was either say goodbye to him tonight or sneak out in the night and never tell him anything at all, and I couldn’t do that to him. You wouldn’t have wanted me to do that to him.”

No, he wouldn't have. Eli could admit that. But even so, it was hard to accept that all this had been happening behind his back — that it had all been decided before he had so much as walked in the door.

“How long have you been planning this?” he asked.

“If I had been planning it, I would have told you,” Katie said. “I didn't mean to catch you by surprise. Honestly. I just... woke up this morning and realized that I couldn't take it anymore. I don't know how to explain it, exactly. The way I felt this morning, realizing that I was getting up to work another sixteen-hour day, that I had no way of knowing when I was going to get any time to myself, if ever... I mean, I can't keep doing it, Eli. I love Charlie. You know I do. I hate to do this, and it'll make me sad to leave him. But I have to do the right thing for myself.”

Outside, Eli heard the sound of a car pulling up.

Katie turned toward the door. “That'll be Evan,” she said.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Your boyfriend?”

“Yeah. I really am sorry about this.” She hesitated. “You know, if Charlie wants to see me again sometime...”

“I don’t think that would be such a good idea,” Eli said. “I think that would be confusing for him. If you’re leaving now, that’s going to have to be the end of your relationship with one another.”

“All right,” Katie said. “I understand.”

“You can walk away from him that easily?”

Katie gave him a look. “Nothing about this is easy,” she said. “I care about that kid. But he’s not my child. If you want to judge someone for being away from him, take a look in the mirror.”

Eli was about to object to her saying that, but she held up a hand. “Don’t bother,” she said. “I don’t work for you anymore. And you’re right. It’s not my concern anymore. But you should at least try to hear it.”

“If that’s all you have to say to me, I think you should go.”

“I think I should,” Katie said. She picked up a backpack that Eli hadn’t noticed at first and slung it over her shoulder. “Thanks, Eli,” she said. “It was good while it lasted.”

He wanted to call after her, to tell her that she shouldn’t depend on a good

recommendation from him if she wanted a reference for her next job — but he couldn't lie. She had been good at what she did. That was why she would be so sorely missed. He might not like the way things were ending for them — he hated the way things were ending, as a matter of fact — but that didn't erase six months of great childcare, or the relationship she had had with Charlie.

Speaking of whom...

“Dad?”

Eli turned and saw his six-year-old son standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Charlie was the spitting image of his mother — blond, blue-eyed, with dimples when he smiled, which he wasn't doing now.

“Is Katie gone?” he asked.

“Yeah, bud. She's gone.”

“Oh.”

“Are you okay?”

“I thought she might change her mind,” Charlie said. “She told me she still liked me.”

“Of course she still likes you,” Eli assured his son. “You know that's not why she left, don't you?”

“She said she couldn't work here anymore and that she was sad about it.”

“Yeah, that's about right.”

“Did you fire her?”

“No, no, I didn’t fire her.” Eli went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of orange juice. He poured two glasses and put one of them on the table.

Charlie climbed up into his usual chair and took a sip. “Can I have cookies too?”

“It’s a little late for cookies.”

“I know, but please?”

“Okay, just this once.” Eli went to the cupboard, only realizing once he was halfway there that he didn’t actually know whether they had cookies. Ordering groceries had been one of Katie’s responsibilities, and she had always done a good job, but he left the weekly treats up to her discretion. He didn’t know what they might have.

He was in luck, though — an unopened bag of chocolate chip cookies was at the front of the cupboard. Eli pulled it down, took out two cookies, thought for a moment, and then added a third.

Charlie brightened up at the sight of them. “Katie only ever lets me have two,” he said.

“Well, we could each use a treat tonight, I think.” Eli kind of wished his treat could have taken the form of a splash of vodka in his orange juice, but he never drank while he was in charge of Charlie. Now that there was no nanny on duty, he knew the time wasn’t right for a drink. He grabbed himself a couple of cookies instead.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“If you didn’t fire Katie then why did she have to go?” Charlie asked.

“She wanted to live with her boyfriend.” It was the simplest explanation Eli could come up with for what had happened.

“Oh,” Charlie said. “Why couldn’t her boyfriend come and live with us here?”

“I don’t think they really wanted to do that,” Eli said. “And we didn’t really want to do that either. We didn’t want to invite him to live here.”

“Is he a bad guy?”

“No, I’m sure he’s fine. It’s just that this is our house, not a home for Katie and everyone she wants to live with. We had her here aslong as she was working for us, but she’s ready to move on and do other things now. And that’s okay.”

“Is she going to marry her boyfriend?”

“I don’t know,” Eli said. “She didn’t tell me. Maybe she will.”

“And maybe she’ll have kids.”

“I guess. She didn’t tell me that either.”

“I hope she does. Maybe I could be friends with her kids someday.”

“Maybe,” Eli agreed, knowing full well that Charlie would forget all about that idea

in a matter of weeks. There was no need to argue with him about it right now.

“Well,” Charlie said. “I guess that’s all right, then.”

“Yeah? That’s okay with you?”

“Yeah, I want Katie to get married if that’s what she wants,” Charlie said. “I hope we get to go to the wedding.”

Eli hummed noncommittally.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think you’ll ever get married?”

It wasn’t the first time Charlie had asked that question. He was aware that his parents hadn’t been married, even though he didn’t have any real memories of his mother. Fiona had died in an accident when Charlie was only two years old.

“I don’t know, kid,” Eli said. “Seems to me our family is pretty good as it is, don’t you think?”

“I mean, yeah,” Charlie agreed. “It’s good.”

“So why would I want to get married?”

Charlie shrugged his shoulders and set about breaking his cookie into quarters, a habit he had to make his snacks seem to last longer.

Eli watched his son and pondered the question Charlie had asked him. Would he ever get married?

Honestly, he couldn't imagine it happening.

He was barely able to keep his head above water as it was, and that was going to get even more difficult now that Katie had left. The responsibilities of his job kept him so busy that he barely had time to be a father to his son. Kate had been right about that, though he didn't like to admit it — he felt a lot of guilt over the fact that he had to spend so much of his time at work, and that he wasn't able to be with Charlie.

But he was all his son had. Fiona's death meant that Charlie was alone in the world apart from him. Eli and Fiona had never had a romantic relationship, but they had been wonderful coparents, and Eli missed having her around.

He knew he would never marry, though. As much as he had enjoyed coparenting, he just couldn't see how he would ever balance all the different sides of his life with a romantic relationship. When would he find the time to go on dates? It couldn't be done.

"You'd better get back to bed, kid," he told Charlie. "You're up way past your bedtime."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Yeah, okay.” Charlie had always been good about observing bedtime — it was one struggle, at least, that they didn’t have.

But as he watched his son disappear up the stairs to the bedroom, Eli wondered what he was going to do. Without childcare, he was going to have to stay home from work tomorrow, and probably the next day as well.

Arrangements were going to have to be made for a new nanny as quickly as possible.

## CHAPTER 2

### MADDIE

“I have amazing news!” Tess said happily as Maddie came in the door of the small house the two of them shared.

“You look excited,” Maddie observed.

“I am!” Tess agreed, bouncing up and down on her toes.

“Can I take a shower first?” Maddie laughed. She’d just come from the beach and was still in her lifeguard suit. It was getting cold underneath the tracksuit she always wore over it when her shift was over, and she had been thinking of a nice hot shower ever since she’d left work.

“This won’t take long,” Tess promised. “I’ve been anxious to tell you all day.”

“Okay, okay,” Maddie agreed with a smile — Tess’s energy was infectious. “What’s the big news?”

“Damian wants us to live together!”

“Oh, wow.” Maddie’s eyes widened. “That’s big.”

“I know, right? I had no idea it was coming so soon!”

To tell the truth, Maddie hadn’t expected it either. Tess and Damian had only been dating for six months, and while they made a fairly cute couple, the move seemed rushed to Maddie. She didn’t want to rain on her friend’s parade, but she couldn’t help wondering whether Tess had really thought this through.

Between the two of them, Tess had always been the flighty, impulsive one. And sometimes that was great. It had been Tess’s idea for the two of them to move to San Diego after college. It had been Tess who had suggested renting this house — they hadn’t even looked at any other places. They had been out for a walk one day and had seen the place with a for-rent sign, and Tess had been immediately in love. She’d insisted on walking in for a look, and they had submitted their application later that day.

Maddie wasn’t like that. Her approach to life was much more cautious. Maybe that was why she hadn’t been on a date in over a year. She’d been asked, but it had always seemed like such a big step to take with someone she didn’t even know. It was an idea that Tess laughed at, reminding her that going out on one date was no commitment at all and that she might as well give it a try, but the longer Maddie went without dating, the more difficult a hurdle it began to feel like.

“So when are you going to move in with him?” she asked.

“As soon as possible,” Tess said. “Now that we’ve decided to do it, neither one of us wants to wait.”

Maddie had to smile. That was classic Tess. “I think this calls for some champagne,” she said. “Do we still have that bottle?”

“I think so.” Tess went to the fridge and pulled it out. “I knew there would be a good occasion to open this soon. I had a sixth sense about it.”

“You and your sixth senses,” Maddie laughed, getting down a couple of glasses. “I’m going to miss having you as a roommate, Tess! We’ve been living together since we were teenagers!” The two of them had been assigned to one another freshman year, and they had never looked back.

“I know,” Tess groaned. “You’re like one of my sisters at this point, we’ve lived together so long. Whose clothes am I going to borrow? Not Damian’s!”

“You may have to start doing laundry more regularly.”

“Gross. Maybe I can get Damian to do that for me.”

“You probably can. He adores you.”

“Well, it’s not as if it’s going to be right away,” Tess said, sipping her champagne. “Us being separated, I mean.”

“What are you talking about? You just said you and Damian wanted to move in together as soon as possible. I assumed you were talking about doing it this week or something. That sounds like you.”

“Oh, yeah, I mean he’s going to start moving his things in tomorrow,” Tess said. “But

we already talked about it, and we don't want to kick you out right away or anything. You can take as much time as you need to find a new place."

Maddie set her glass down slowly. "Oh," she said, realizing that she had misunderstood. "You're talking about him moving in here."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Well, yeah,” Tess said.

Then she seemed to catch up to Maddie’s train of thought. “Oh, no,” she said. “You thought I meant I was moving out.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed. I just figured the two of you would want a place of your own.”

“No, I should have said that right from the start,” Tess said. “I’m sorry, Maddie. I didn’t mean to be misleading. It’s just... you know how much I love this place. I always have.”

“I know,” Maddie said. “You were the one who fell in love with this house back when we first found it. It never meant as much to me as it did to you.”

What neither of them was saying was that Tess paid the lion’s share of the rent on the house. It had been part of their agreement when they had decided to rent the place, because they had both been aware of the fact that Maddie simply couldn’t afford a place like this and still continue to contribute to her savings account. The thought that Tess was leaving had definitely been financially scary, and Maddie had known in the back of her mind that she would have to consider leaving, but she hadn’t started to thinking about that yet.

She was thinking about it now, though. It was so like Tess to get so excited about her big news that she’d forget the fact that it wouldn’t be exciting news for Maddie. Tess wasn’t unkind, but she could be a little thoughtless sometimes.



Maddie wasn't angry, of course. She understood. Tess was just excited about what lay ahead for her, and Maddie felt excited on her behalf. But that didn't change the fact that this was going to be difficult for her to cope with. Where was she going to go now? What was she going to do?

Tess was watching her. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I wasn't thinking. There really is no hurry for you to move out. Take as long as you'd like to figure it out. It's not as if Damian is going to need your room. In fact, if you just want to go on living with us for a while, that would probably be okay. I can talk to him. We could all be roommates!"

"Don't be silly." Maddie gave her friend a warm smile. "I appreciate you letting me stay until I get it figured out, Tess, but we aren't kids anymore. We'll be thirty in a few years. You and Damian are taking a big step, and I want you to be able to do that without your college roommate living in the next room."

"It is a big step, isn't it?" Tess giggled, her good humor restored.

"So big," Maddie assured her. "You're going to be taking your relationship to a whole new level. I'm really happy for you."

"Are you sure? I know this is a lot to ask of you. I probably should have talked to you about it first. Or differently. I don't know."

"Stop," Maddie said, picking up her glass of champagne again. "We're celebrating, okay? We always knew that you and I weren't going to live together for the rest of our lives. This will be a good opportunity for me to strike out on my own and try to figure out what I'm doing next. It was about time for me to do that anyway."

"I just feel bad," Tess said. "I mean, this is a big deal for me, but I feel bad that you have to change your life because of it."

“Just promise me that I can be maid of honor in your wedding,” Maddie teased.

Tess laughed. “Nobody is getting married!”

“Yet. What do you think comes next after you move in together?”

“Do you think we’re rushing things? We’ve only been dating for six months, after all.”

“I definitely think you’re rushing things. But you wouldn’t be you if you didn’t,” Maddie told her friend. “You’re not one to wait when you’ve seen something you want. You never have been. I’m happy for you, Tess, really. This is going to be great.”

“I’ll help you look for a new place,” Tess said.

“Don’t worry about that right now. I’m sure something will present itself. I have a way of landing on my feet.”

That much, at least, was the truth. When the hits had come Maddie’s way — and there had been plenty of hits over the years — she had always found a way to rise to the occasion.

Her biggest supporter in life had been her father. He’d been there for her every day when she was younger and chasing the dream of becoming a professional dancer. He had been the one to drive her to all her dance lessons, and he had been in the front row at every recital. He had filmed her performances and watched them with her afterward, discussing the performances, telling her which parts he liked the best and listening as she critiqued her own performances.

His death, caused by a sudden heart attack, had been the most difficult trial of

Maddie's young life. She had been fourteen years old at the time, and it had rocked her whole world. But she had recovered, promising herself that she would do what he would want to see her do with her life. He had always stressed the importance of a good education, so she had applied herself and had gotten into a good college. And he had supported her dream of dancing, so she had continued to pursue that as well.

And then Maddie had faced the second ordeal of her life — at the age of twenty-one, she had suffered a torn Achilles tendon.

It had meant the end of her career. Although the injury was long since healed, her strength and mobility would never be what they had been before the injury. She could dance for fun now — and she did — but she would never be a professional ballerina, as she had once hoped.

She had grieved the loss — and then she had adjusted her dream. Now her hope was to open up a dance school of her own, to bring the joy of dance to the next generation. But as of now, there was no hope of that happening. She didn't have anywhere near the kind of money it would take to make something like that happen. And the fact that she was going to have to find a new place to live, somewhere she would have to pay the rent on all by herself, was going to put her dream that much further out of reach.

But she'd meant what she had said to Tess. She would get through this and find a way to land on her feet.

"I'll start looking for a new apartment tomorrow," she told her friend, with an unpleasant twinge of realization. This house had been Tess's fantasy, not hers, but Maddie had definitely gotten used to it. It was small, but it was modern and had been recently renovated, and it was only a few blocks from the beach, which meant that Maddie could walk to work. She'd have to find a place that was similarly close to the beach, since her car was an old clunker and she didn't want to have to worry about

buying a new one. She couldn't afford to depend on it too heavily.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“You don’t have to start looking right away,” Tess assured her. “There’s plenty of time for that.”

“No, it’s all right.” Maddie wanted to begin the search, if she was honest. Now that she knew what lay ahead, there was no sense in putting it off. It would be awful to linger around this house, watching Tess move on with her life and knowing that she herself hadn’t done so yet.

Maddie had felt as if she was lagging behind her friend for years. When they had left college, they had been in the same place in their lives — looking for jobs, going out on casual dates on Friday and Saturday nights. They had both worked as bartenders for a few years, and it had felt like their lives were on the same track. But then, all of a sudden, Tess had landed a job as an office manager at a law firm and had started pulling down a much larger salary, one that had allowed her to pay the rent on this house. Maddie had considered getting an office job, but after a few of her applications had yielded no results, she had given up. She didn’t want to work in an office anyway, and to do so would have felt like giving up on her dream of opening a ballet studio.

But that didn’t make it any easier to see Tess doing so much better than she was. Moving forward in her life, while Maddie felt as if she was stuck in place and might never move forward.

Leaving the house she had shared with Tess would be a change. She wasn’t sure if she was ready for it.

But maybe it was a step she needed to take.

## CHAPTER 3

ELI

“I want to go to the beach,” Charlie whined.

“I have to work, Charlie,” Eli said. “You know that.”

He hadn’t been able to go in to the office thanks to the fact that Katie had quit, leaving him with no childcare to speak of. But work still had to get done. Unfortunately, neither Eli nor Charlie were used to this configuration. Eli had a home office, but he rarely used it, and he had never bothered to establish rules about it for Charlie. As a result, Charlie seemed to feel that it was fine to come into the office at any time and to interrupt his father’s work with requests to go to the beach.

“Katie was going to take me to the beach today,” Charlie said. “She promised.”

“When did she promise that? I know she didn’t say anything about the beach to you yesterday.” There was no way Katie would have done that while she was in the process of quitting. It had been inconsiderate of her to leave so quickly the way she had, but she wasn’t that inconsiderate. She wouldn’t have made Charlie a promise she couldn’t keep.

“She said we could always go on Saturdays,” Charlie explained. “And we always did. Today was supposed to be beach day.”

“I didn’t know you knew it was Saturday. When did you learn the days of the week?”

“I’m six, Dad,” Charlie said. “And there’s a calendar in my room. Plus, it says the day of the week on my tablet.”

“Okay, okay.” It was moments like this that left Eli feeling a little ashamed of himself. He should be more aware of what his son knew and didn’t know. These were the things you missed out on when you were away from home as much as he was.

But it couldn’t be helped. Work was important. It wasn’t just that Eli loved his job. He did love it, of course. He took pride in the tech security software he had developed and knew that it was the best on the market. He also knew that having the job he did meant that his son would never want for anything in his life. Charlie had lost his mother at such a young age that Eli wanted to make sure he had everything else he could possibly want or need.

The trouble was, right now what Charlie wanted was to spend the day at the beach.

It was a perfectly reasonable thing for a child to want, and Eli knew it. Of course Charlie didn’t want to sit around the house in front of the TV while his father worked all day. Of course he wanted to do something fun.

It wouldn’t be able to be like this every day. But maybe Eli could take him to the beach for a few hours. It wasn’t as if he would have to unplug completely to do it. He could bring his phone along with him and try to get some emails answered.

“All right,” he said. “Go change into your swimsuit and I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“Aren’t you going to change?” Charlie pressed.

“Yeah, I am.” Eli was wearing nice pants and a collared shirt, and even though he had no intention of going in the water, that was no attire for the beach.

He went up to his room and changed into track shorts and a tank top. By the time he came downstairs. Charlie was ready to go and had been trying to spray himself with sunscreen. It was clear that he had missed his skin more often than he’d hit it — there

was going to be a cleanup job to do later. The house cleaners only came every other day, and someone would slip on that sunscreen if it was allowed to sit there.

But right now, Charlie was bouncing on his toes and was clearly beyond eager to get going. Eli grabbed a couple of towels from the linen closet and tossed one to his son. “All right,” he said. “Just a few hours, okay? And when I say it’s time to come back, no arguing — it’s time to come back.”

“Okay, Dad.”

The public beach was only a few blocks away, so they were able to walk there. Eli didn’t enjoy the walk. He was deeply conscious of his phone in his pocket and the amount of time he had spent without looking at it. So many emails might have come in during that time, and what if one of them had been urgent? What if he had a client waiting to talk to him, wondering why they couldn’t get hold of him? Eli prided himself on his ability to respond quickly to his clients, and he knew they valued the fact that he didn’t keep them waiting when they needed something. If he had to go through very many days like today, that reputation might be damaged, or even lost.

By the time they reached the beach, he felt like he was coming out of his skin. “I’m going to check a few emails,” he told Charlie.

“You’re not going to play with me?”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“I will, but give me a few minutes to get caught up here.”

“I want to go in the water,” Charlie said.

“That’s fine, but stay right on the edge,” Eli said. “Stay where you can sit down and it doesn’t go over your head, okay? And right in front of me, so I’ll be able to see you.”

“I want to go out deeper than that, Dad.”

“No. Absolutely not. If you go past where I’m telling you, we’re going to turn around and go back home.”

Charlie scowled. “Katie would have gone into the water with me.”

“Katie isn’t here. Look, just stay on the shore. It’s not safe for you to go into the water by yourself.”

Charlie scowled, turned, and stormed off down the beach.

Eli sighed. Even though he had gone out of his way to try to do something special for his son, it already seemed to be backfiring on him. Now he was going to struggle to get his work done, and he wouldn’t even get the benefit of Charlie being happy with him for it. It was deeply frustrating.

This is why I need to have a nanny. He was going to have to hire someone as soon as possible, and he knew it. But he didn’t want to cut corners and hire someone subpar because he was in a hurry. He had to make sure that whoever he found was competent

to take care of Charlie. Eli knew that he wasn't the most involved parent in the world, but that didn't mean he neglected his responsibility to his son. Charlie would always have the best.

He opened his email inbox, and it was as he'd feared — emails from clients had come pouring in, just in the few minutes he'd been distracted. Most of the emails were things that could wait, but one of his clients was angry that her copy of the software wasn't working properly and was threatening to cancel and demanding refunds. Eli wished he was in the office so that he could have called the client from a nice quiet environment. He couldn't do it here, he knew. Waves were crashing, children were shouting — it would be completely unprofessional.

He drafted a quick email offering to come in and personally take a look at the software. He knew he was going to have to bring Charlie with him, most likely, but that was something that could be dealt with. And maybe if he gave himself a few days to prepare, he might be able to find a babysitter. It was possible.

He read the email over, decided it was as good as it was going to get, and hit send. He watched his phone for a moment, wondering if he was going to get a reply, but he knew how unlikely an instant response was. It would make him feel better to hear something back right away, but that didn't mean he could expect it.

Maybe he ought to walk down to the water and spend a little time with Charlie. It seemed like the least he could do. He tucked his phone into his pocket and got to his feet?—

And frowned.

Charlie wasn't in front of him. He was nowhere to be seen.

Panic leapt up into Eli's throat, and he tried his best to control it. He shouldn't

overreact. Charlie was around here somewhere. He wouldn't have gone far. He knew better than to go out into the water. He had probably wandered down the beach, that was all.

But he had been talking about wanting to go out into deeper water...

No. No, he wouldn't have.

Eli started jogging down the beach, turning this way and that as he went, aware that he might be running in the wrong direction and moving farther away from his son. "Charlie!" he yelled.

Several people looked at him, but there was no sign of Charlie.

Starting to panic in earnest now, Eli ran to a lifeguard tower. The guard wasn't there, so he started to climb it, hoping to get a better look at the beach. Maybe he would catch sight of Charlie that way.

"Um, excuse me," a voice called. "You can't be up there."

He looked down, prepared to shout at whoever was daring to interrupt his search for his son, and his knees went weak with relief.

The voice belonged to a sun-bronzed lifeguard with strawberry blond hair that fell in waves down her back. She was looking up at him with a stern expression on her face — but he couldn't focus on that, because she was also holding Charlie by the hand.

Eli jumped down at once and fell to his knees in the sand. "Charlie, where the hell were you?"

"Swear jar, Dad."

“I told you to stay right in front of me! Where did you go?”

“I was looking for sand dollars!” Charlie held up his hand so his father could observe the one he had found. “Look, it’s perfect. Not even chipped.”

“You were supposed to stay right in front of me. What were you thinking, wandering off like that?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

The lifeguard cleared her throat. “Sir, I don’t mean to interrupt, but we do require that kids of his age be supervised by a parent or guardian if they’re going to be on the beach.”

“I know,” Eli said. “I only took my eyes off him for a second. He knows better than to wander off like that.” He looked Charlie up and down. “Did you go in the water?”

“No. Obviously. My swimsuit isn’t wet.”

“Don’t catch an attitude with me. You broke the rules. I told you we would be going home if this happened.”

“Dad!”

“Don’tDadme.” He looked up at the lifeguard. “Thank you for finding him,” he said. “Honestly, anything could have happened.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry. These things happen to the best of us. You’re just lucky it wasn’t any worse.”

“I know I was.” He knew all too well. He had read horror stories in the news about what happened when little kids got caught in riptides.

Eli took a breath. Now that he was feeling slightly less panicked, he was beginning to really appreciate what this woman had donefor him. “I owe you one,” he told her. “You might have saved my son’s life today.”

“I wasn’t drowning, Dad, I was digging up a sand dollar.”

Eli wasn’t about to alarm his son with stories of freak waves or kidnappers. He kept his attention on the pretty lifeguard instead.

There were definitely worse things to be looking at. The wind had caught her hair, making it blow around her face. She didn’t seem at all self-conscious about the fact that she was standing in front of him in nothing but a one-piece swimsuit while he was fully dressed. Of course, she was probably used to standing in front of people in her swimsuit since it was a part of her job, and Eli was used to pretty girls in their suits at the beach. Usually they were even less covered up than she was, in string bikinis instead of one-piece lifeguard suits.

But that didn’t seem to make a difference. The fact of the matter was that she had his attention in a way no woman had in a very long time.

He and Fiona had not been in a relationship. Charlie had been the result of a one-night stand, a pregnancy they had mutually decided to keep because they had both wanted a child and had liked each other as friends enough to give coparenting a try. Eli had continued to date after his son’s birth.

But he hadn’t dated since Fiona’s death. It had changed everything for him. There had been no more nights when Charlie was with his mother, so bringing girls home had become completely impractical, as had staying at their places for the night. He had resigned himself to the idea that he would have to take a few years off from dating — and with that idea in his mind, he realized now, he had stopped noticing women.

But he was definitely noticing the one standing in front of him now. She made his heart beat faster and his blood rush. He had forgotten what those sensations felt like.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Maddie,” she said. “Maddie Foster.”

“Maddie, I’m Eli Sinclair.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Listen, would you like to come out for ice cream with me and Charlie?” The idea came to him on a whim. “My way of saying thank you for this.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” she said quickly. “I was only doing my job.”

“It really would be my pleasure. And our treat.”

“Come with!” Charlie urged. “I want ice cream.”

Maddie chuckled. “That’s hard to say no to.”

“Are you off work soon?”

“Now, actually. I was about to go punch out for the day.”

“Let us get you some ice cream. There’s a great place around the corner from here — Sprinkle Time?”

“I know it.”

“What do you say?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Okay,” Maddie agreed. “You’ve convinced me. Let me go punch my time card and I’ll meet you back here, and then we can go.”

### CHAPTER 4

#### MADDIE

Maddie had to wonder, as she rinsed off in the guard showers and pulled her track pants on over her suit, if she was losing her mind. Going out with a strange man? That wasn’t the kind of thing she would ordinarily have agreed to — what had come over her?

Maybe it was just the fact that the little boy — Charlie — had seemed so eager to spend time with her. She had to admit, she’d found him charming, and she was excited to spend a little more time with him as well. She had been worried when she’d first found him wandering alone on the beach, wondering why he didn’t have an adult with him, but after meeting Eli, she’d relaxed a bit. She’d been doing this job long enough to tell the difference between a negligent parent and one who had just looked away for a moment, and it was obvious that Eli was the latter sort. There was no excuse for taking your eyes off your kid at the beach, of course, but maybe this would be a learning experience for him and he wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

It was also possible that Maddie had agreed to go out for ice cream because of everything that had been going on with herself and Tess. The fact that she had to move out of her house and find somewhere else to live — and more importantly, the fact that Tess was making such progress in her life while Maddie felt stagnant — had



her wanting to try new things. She wanted to come home tonight with a story to tell her friend about something wild and exciting that had happened today, even if it was nothing more significant than ice cream with a cute guy she'd met on the beach.

He really was cute, with his dark hair and dark eyes, with his shorts that showed off the lean muscles of his thighs. She had wondered for a moment, upon first seeing him, whether he was a movie star, but she couldn't think of any movie stars named Eli, so she had to concede that he probably wasn't. Still, he was handsome enough that she would have believed it if someone had told her he was in movies. She would definitely be including that in the story she told Tess when she got home tonight.

She toweled off, hating the fact that she never got fully dry after work. She knew she ought to start packing a change of clothes — but she so rarely went out after work without coming home first that it had never seemed necessary, and she didn't like changing in the staff room. Now she wished she had brought something along so she could have worn a cute sundress instead of her track pants and guard suit.

It couldn't be helped, though. She went back out and found them waiting for her beside her lifeguard chair. Charlie was hopping around in the sand, still clutching his sand dollar.

Eli smiled when he saw her coming, and Maddie felt slightly weak. He was even better looking when he smiled. She hadn't had the wind knocked out of her by a guy in a very long time.

"Ready to go?" he asked her.

"Ready," she said.

"Ready!" Charlie chimed in.

They started up the beach toward the boardwalk that would lead them to the ice cream shop.

“Listen,” Eli said as they walked.

Maddie looked at him.

“You must think I’m a terrible father,” he said.

“I wasn’t thinking that. I don’t even know you.”

“I just want you to know — I wouldn’t usually take my eyes off of him at the beach.”

“I’d hope not.” She had no problem giving him this warning, even though they didn’t know one another. “Charlie seems like a bright kid, but you never know what might happen to kids on the beach. It’s a dangerous place. It’s not a good idea to take risks.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to. I… well, I had an important email from work.” His cheeks colored slightly. “I know that’s not an excuse.”

“If you can’t give Charlie your full attention, maybe you shouldn’t bring him to the beach.” She said it as gently as she could.

“Yeah, maybe not. He really wanted to come. Ordinarily his nanny would be the one to take him so that I could focus on work.”

“It’s her day off or something?”

“No, she quit on us unexpectedly.” His jaw tightened. “She left yesterday with no warning. Moved all her stuff out.”

“She was live-in?”

“Yeah. Which means I have a huge gap to fill for Charlie, obviously. I can’t stop working, but I don’t want his whole life to be derailed either. He’s used to getting to do fun things like having beach days. I was trying to give him everything, and I overestimated my ability to do that.”

Maddie felt a little more sympathetic, hearing their story, than she had at first. “That does sound hard,” she said.

They’d reached the ice cream shop, and they went inside. Charlie began to puzzle over which flavor he might like.

“You should taste them,” Maddie advised him.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Taste them?” He looked up at her, obviously mystified.

“You’ve never done that?”

“I’ve tasted ice cream before.”

“Nah, that’s not what I mean.” She turned to the ice cream scooper. “Can we taste a couple?”

“Which ones?” The teenage girl behind the counter pulled out a handful of wooden tasting spoons.

Maddie turned to Charlie. “What do you want to try?”

“Everything!”

“Nah, not everything. Pick three.”

“But I still get a whole ice cream, right?”

“Yes. This is to help you decide which kind you want.”

Charlie began to discuss his options with the ice cream scooper, and Maddie fell back a few paces to talk to Eli. “I can’t believe he’s never tasted ice cream before.”

“He’s tasted ice cream before.”

“You know what I mean. He’s never sampled it like this.”

“I didn’t realize he hadn’t, to be honest with you,” Eli said. “I’ve brought him here myself a few times, but he usually just orders something quickly. Usually, his nanny would be the one to bring him. I’ve never seen him take his time like this.”

Maddie hesitated, unsure whether she should say what was on her mind.

“What?” Eli asked. “You look like you’re thinking something.”

“Well, it’s just that... I wonder whether he’s been quick about placing his orders in the past because he’s sensed that you’re in a hurry,” Maddie said. “You seem like a guy who doesn’t take a lot of time to enjoy the small things in life. If you brought him to get ice cream, maybe he felt like he needed to order quickly so you could get back to whatever you were doing.”

She held her breath, wondering if she had overstepped.

“You see a lot,” Eli said.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, you’ve got a point,” he said. “I don’t take my time with him when we go out together. It’s the same as what happened on the beach. I split my focus with him. I try to be a good father, but my job just keeps me so busy — this is why I need to have a nanny.”

An idea had been playing at the back of Maddie’s mind. It felt a little crazy — she couldn’t believe she was even thinking it. But at the same time, she saw potential in it, and it had been a long time since she had felt on the verge of anything new in her life.

She swallowed. “Listen... you’re looking for a new nanny. I’m looking for a new job.”

“You are? What about the lifeguard job?”

“I’m only a beach guard during the summer,” she said. “It was ending in a month anyway. Usually I work at the country club pool during the rest of the year, but I’m not attached to doing that. And you said it was a live-in job... I’m looking for something like that.”

“You are? Why?”

Maddie didn’t want to get into her whole situation, so she gave him the short version. “I’m about to have to move out of my house,” she said. “My circumstances have changed.”

“Money problems?”

“Nothing like that.” She was surprised he had been so forward with his question, but maybe it made sense. If he was honestly thinking about hiring her, he’d want to know that she was responsible, and this spoke to that. “It’s just that my roommate is moving in with her boyfriend, so I need to find a new place to live.”

“I see.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“I was going to rent a place, but... well, Charlie seems like such a cool kid, and I wouldn't mind doing something different for a little while.”

“Do you have experience with children?”

He was actually considering it. “I teach swim lessons at the country club during the school year,” she said. “I've done that for several years now. And my long-term goal is to open up a ballet school. I have a passion for working with children.”

“He does seem to like you,” Eli said.

“Does he? I got that feeling, but of course, as his father, you know him best. I like him a lot.”

“When could you start work?”

“In a week. I've got to give them enough time to replace me at the beach if I'm leaving a little early. But there are always people applying for guard jobs. They'll be able to replace me easily. Is a week soon enough?”

“It means I won't have to spend time on hiring, so yeah, I can make that work,” Eli said. “This is really something you want to do?”

“I'd love to. I'm just surprised you're willing to take me on. I thought I might have to push a little harder than that to convince you.”

“I really need a nanny, and you seem to be good with Charlie,” Eli said. “We can give

it a try. If things aren't working out after a couple of weeks, we'll make a change, but I'm definitely willing to give you a chance here."

Maddie's heart leapt in anticipation.

She told herself that her excitement was only for the fact that she was starting something new. It was the first time in a long time that she had had a sense of forward motion in her life, and that felt like a big deal to her. And she really did like Charlie and was looking forward to spending more time with him and getting to know him better. There was no doubt that this was going to be a positive step.

But she had to wonder if she would have done something quite so impetuous if the man in question hadn't been so handsome. Already, she felt affected by him, as if she was in the early days of having a crush.

Which she wasn't, of course. She couldn't be. This wasn't a crush. She couldn't feel that way for someone she wanted to have a professional relationship with. It was the kind of thing you learned fast working as a lifeguard and running around all day with attractive, athletic people in swimsuits. The ones who couldn't manage to keep their hands to themselves were the ones who didn't last. They either ended up getting fired for unprofessionalism or they quit voluntarily because of the drama they had created for themselves. Maddie had always prided herself on being above that sort of thing, but looking at Eli Sinclair, she found herself feeling less secure in her usual determination. Surely it wouldn't hurt to allow herself a bit of fantasizing about Eli, even if he was going to be her new boss? It wasn't as though anything was ever going to come of it.

"Can you come meet with me for a cup of coffee tomorrow?" Eli asked her. "We can sign papers and make it all official."

"I can do that. Tomorrow is my day off anyway." Maddie was already looking



forward to tomorrow, knowing that she would be seeing him again.

She needed to be careful with this. It was a promising situation, and she was excited about it, but she couldn't afford to let herself get carried away here.

After all, she wouldn't be any good at the job she was being hired for if she couldn't keep her eyes off the boss. And then she would find herself right back where she had started.

## CHAPTER 5

### MADDIE

Maddie checked the address that Eli had texted to her and then looked back up at the house in front of her. "No way," she murmured.

She had known the Sinclairs were probably well off, of course. Nobody had a live-in nanny who didn't also have a pretty hefty disposable income. And when she had turned into this neighborhood, her suspicions had been confirmed. She had been embarrassed to drive her beater car through the streets of a ritzy place like this, afraid that the residents were peering out at her through their bespoke curtains and clutching their expensive phones in case they decided she looked like she was coming to rob one of these houses and they needed to call the police on her.

She was grateful not to have been stopped yet. It felt like a small miracle.

But now she was standing on the driveway, looking up at the house that matched the address Eli had given her, and she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing.

Even calling this a driveway seemed a bit ridiculous. It was the size of a small parking lot, but it was much too glamorous to be called that either. It ran in a wide

horseshoe shape from the street up to the double front doors, with immaculate shrubbery and flowers on either side. Obviously Eli wasn't handling the groundskeeping himself if he couldn't even find time to relax over ice cream with his son. He must have someone on staff to do that too.

How many people work here?

Who is this guy?

She was beginning to wish that she had insisted on having the job interview at his house instead of a coffee shop. It wouldn't have changed anything for her — she was already feeling a stir of anticipation at the thought that she was actually going to be living in this insane house — but it would have helped to be a little more prepared for what she was walking into. Had Eli thought about that? Had he kept this a secret from her on purpose for some reason? Or was he just so used to this kind of luxury that hadn't occurred to him that she might need to be warned?

It was the biggest house on the block. It was the biggest house in the whole neighborhood. Maddie glanced back at her car and felt even more embarrassed at having needed to drive that thing, packed full of all her stuff, to get here. This was not a place she was ever going to fit in, and she knew it.

Even so, she'd made a commitment, and besides, she had already moved out of Tess's house. It was time to see this through.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

She walked up the wide, shallow steps that led to the front door.

Eli had the door open before she got there. “I see you found the place.”

“I could probably have found this place from orbit,” Maddie blurted. Then she felt her cheeks go hot. “Oh my God. I can’t believe I said that. Inside thought, Maddie.”

But Eli was laughing. “It’s all right,” he said. “You’re right. It’s a big house. Too big for the two of us, really, but I like to take care of my staff too. You’ll have your own suite, so there will be plenty of privacy.”

“My own suite?” Maddie hadn’t expected that. When she had told Tess she was taking a job as a live-in nanny, the two of them had joked about how she would probably be sleeping on a twin-size bed in a small room and sharing a bathroom with Charlie. It was what Maddie had expected with a job like this one, and she hadn’t even minded. It had seemed like an adventure.

But her ownsuite?

“Would you like to see it?” Eli asked. “Maybe get settled in a bit?”

“I’d love to,” Maddie said. “Let me grab my duffel, and I’ll come back for the rest of my things.”

“No, there’s no need,” Eli said.

“Oh, God, don’t tell me — you’ve got a butler or something who’s going to bring my

stuff in?”

Eli burst out laughing. “No, I don’t have a butler,” he said. “But I do like to be courteous. I’ll bring your things up for you.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Yes you can. Let me take you up and you can start to get settled, and I’ll start bringing things up and putting them in the hall so I won’t disturb you while you’re getting the lay of the land.”

“All right,” Maddie said. Thatdidsound pretty good. “But I will bring my duffel with me.”

It had been in the passenger seat of the car, and she pulled it out and slung the strap over her shoulder. The bag had all the most important things she owned, the things that would make her new room — no, her newsuite— feel like her own once they were arranged within it.

It was quiet inside the house. They walked into what felt to Maddie like a massive foyer — the ceiling must have been three stories up. She looked around. “Is Charlie here?”

“He’s having a playdate with a friend of his,” Eli said. “I thought it would be better if he was out when you arrived, so he wouldn’t be all over you.”

Maddie nodded. That had been thoughtful, but actually, she thought she would have preferred it if Charlie had been here. A child’s presence would have made all of this feel a little more relaxed.

But maybe Eli had a point. It would be nice to unpack her things and settle in without

feeling like she was on the job, and she couldn't deny that Charlie's presence would have made her feel like she needed to engage with him and entertain him. This way, she could have a few hours that were just about her and her new life.

He led her up the stairs to the second floor and down the hall. "Your room is in the same part of the house as Charlie's, but not too close," Eli said. "I want you to be able to get to him easily in the night if he needs you, but I don't want him bothering you at all hours. My intention is that your rooms should be a place for you to go when you want to be alone — when you're off duty — and Charlie won't be allowed to bother you here unless it's an emergency. I know living in can be hard, and I do want you to feel as if you have your own private space while you're here."

"I appreciate that," Maddie said honestly. She had wondered what to expect in that regard, whether she would be expected to always be on call and to tend to Charlie's needs day and night. Tess had been shocked to learn that she hadn't cleared that up in the interview and had warned Maddie that she was going to be taken advantage of by her new employer, and Maddie had been at a bit of a loss to explain why that was a risk she was willing to take. The truth was that there was something so exciting about this new opportunity — and about Eli, who she couldn't seem to take her eyes off of — that she would have accepted almost any working conditions in the short term. At least it meant that her life was moving forward.

Eli stopped outside a large wooden door. "All right," he said. "This is yours."

"Should I...?"

"Yeah, go on in."

Maddie opened the door and stepped inside. She was immediately stunned by what she saw.

The room she'd walked into wasn't a bedroom. It was more like a living room or a sitting room — a tan couch, deep and soft-looking, positioned in front of a wide-screen TV. There was a little mini-refrigerator in the corner of the room. She went over and opened it and saw that it was stocked with a variety of drinks.

“Those are still the drinks my last nanny ordered,” Eli explained. “But give me a list of what you like and we'll have it ordered for you. A few small snacks can go in there too — and non-refrigerated snacks can be kept in that cupboard. You're always welcome to anything in the kitchen, but if you want to have access to something in the middle of the night, it's easier to have it here. All I ask is that you don't drink alcohol when you're going to have Charlie.”

“Oh, God, of course not.” Maddie wouldn't have even thought of doing that.

Eli nodded. “If you need help figuring out the TV, let me know, but I think it's pretty standard.”

“I should be able to handle it.” It was the same brand that Tess had owned, though a nicer model.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“The bedroom is through there, and the bathroom opens off of it,” Eli said. “I’ll let you start settling in and go bring up the rest of your things.”

“Thank you,” Maddie said. “This is amazing. I really appreciate all of it.”

“No, you’re the one who is doing me a huge favor here,” Eli said. “You have no idea how good it is to have this nanny problem solved — and to know that it’s going to be someone my son actually likes. He’s really excited about this.”

“So am I,” Maddie assured Eli.

Eli grinned at her.

Maddie caught her breath. That expression on his face was enough to make her feel weak in the knees. It was an entirely different experience from noticing how handsome he was, because it felt as though he was trying to charm her. As if he wanted her to notice him.

But that couldn’t be true, of course. She was reading into things, seeing what she wanted to see. She was indulging her own fantasies. He was smiling at her because that was a polite way to act toward a person — that was as far as it went.

He turned and left the room. Maddie was glad — and she was also glad that he had promised to put her things out in the hall instead of bringing them in. She closed the door behind him and, after a moment to ponder whether what she was doing was allowed, decided it was okay to lock it. She didn’t have childcare responsibilities right now, after all. It was okay to be on her own.

She took her laptop out of her duffel bag, plugged it in, and checked the charge on her phone. There was enough, so she placed a video call to Tess.

Tess answered in one ring. “You all moved in?”

“Tess, you wouldn’t believe this place. It’s insane.”

“Show me,” Tess urged.

Maddie flipped the camera on her phone and began to walk around the room. “I haven’t even seen the bedroom yet,” she said. “This is just the... I don’t know what to call this. The living room, I guess.”

Tess let out a low whistle. “That’s this guy’s living room?”

“No, this is my living room. Part of my private suite.” She walked down the hall toward the bedroom. “This whole space is mine.”

“Oh, you’re kidding,” Tess said enviously. “Maybe we should swap places. You come back here and live with Damian, and I’ll live in the rich guy’s house.”

Maddie laughed. “You’d have to be a nanny,” she reminded her friend. “I don’t think you’d like that part very much.”

“No, you’re right, I wouldn’t, but... wow. Is there a bathroom?”

“I haven’t looked at it yet. I bet this is it.” Maddie opened a door off of her bedroom. “Oh — no, this is a walk-in closet.”

“A walk-in? What else do you have, a butler?”



“No butler. I already asked about that, actually. But he is downstairs bringing my boxes up for me.”

“He — you mean the guy you’re working for? He’s bringing up your stuff for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like he’s the one working for you.”

“He’s just being nice.” Maddie sat down on the bed and immediately felt herself sink into the mattress. This was going to be so comfortable to sleep on. “He’s a really nice guy.”

“Yeah, seems like it,” Tess said dubiously.

“What’s that all about?”

“You said he was cute.”

“He is cute. I’ll take a picture for you.”

“You’re going to send me a picture of your cute boss?”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“When I do, you’ll have to agree that he’s the cutest guy ever. Only don’t let Damian see it,” Maddie warned. “He’ll probably be jealous.”

“He’s not going to be jealous because I looked at a picture of your boss. How cute can this guy possibly be?”

“Heart-stoppingly.”

Tess grew serious. “You need to be careful, Maddie,” she said. “You know that, don’t you? I mean, you know you can’t get involved with your boss.”

“Of course I do,” Maddie said quickly. “Do you really think I would do something like that?”

“Generally, no, but I also didn’t think you’d quit your job lifeguarding and become a live-in nanny for a guy you just met. You’re surprising me quite a lot lately, and I just want you to be careful. You cannot get involved with this man, no matter how cute he is. There’s no way that would end well.”

“I know,” Maddie agreed, half grateful for her friend’s advice and half annoyed that Tess felt the need to give it. “Nothing is going to happen.”

But as they ended their call, Maddie had to admit that she wasn’t completely confident in her ability to stay away from Eli Sinclair.

I can do it, she told herself firmly. It’s just a crush, and this is just a job. I can look, but I won’t touch. It’s as simple as that.

## CHAPTER 6

### MADDIE

“Charlie, breakfast time.”

Charlie, who was clearly a morning person, opened the door to his bedroom. He had already dressed for the day, Maddie saw. It was no surprise to her that a six-year-old could dress himself, of course, but she did find it a pleasant surprise how much joy he seemed to take in the task. She had also been happy to see that he had some of the options an ordinary boy of his age would have had — she’d wondered whether his father would always dress him in clothes with designer labels, but today he was wearing a T-shirt with a superhero on it.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asked her.

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Do you know how to cook?”

“I’m all right at it. Let me know what you want and I can give it a try.”

“French toast?”

“I think I can manage.”

Charlie grinned and joined her in the hallway. The two of them made their way down the stairs to the kitchen.

As it turned out, the staff was nowhere near as large as Maddie had imagined it might be when she had first moved in. There was a groundskeeper, as she’d thought, but she

rarely saw him. There were cleaners, but they were hired to come intermittently. Eli did have a cook, but the cook's job was to make dinner, not breakfast — breakfast had turned out to be one of Maddie's duties. Eli had said she was welcome to just pour Charlie a bowl of cereal each day, but she'd gotten into the habit of making him something a little nicer, and she could tell that it meant a great deal to him.

Something occurred to her as they reached the kitchen. "It's Sunday," she said.

"I know," Charlie said. "I have a calendar in my room."

"Isn't your dad at home?"

"Probably not," Charlie said. "Probably he's at the office."

"On Sunday?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Well... most people don't go to the office on Sundays," Maddie said.

"Oh. They don't?"

"I don't know about everybody, but a lot of people take Sundays off and stay at home. Some people do that on Saturdays too."

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Well, not Dad,” Charlie said. “He works every day. Hey, can I have strawberries on my French toast?”

“Sure you can.”

“And powdered sugar?”

“No problem.” If Maddie could find powdered sugar, that was. She went to the refrigerator to look for the strawberries.

“Your dad is a hard worker, isn’t he?” she asked Charlie, knowing that she needed to approach this subject with care. She didn’t want it getting back to Eli that she had talked to Charlie about him. For that matter, she didn’t want to question Charlie’s father to him. He shouldn’t have to wonder whether his father cared more about work than he did about family. He was only six years old, after all.

She started the French toast. Charlie climbed up on a barstool at the kitchen island to watch her work.

“Yeah,” he said. “Dad works hard. He has to.”

“Does he?”

“He has a really important job,” Charlie said. “Do you know about Dad’s job?”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” She knew that Eli did something in tech, but she wasn’t sure exactly what it was. She also wasn’t confident that Charlie was going to

be able to explain it, but maybe she would be able to figure it out based on what he could tell her.

“He works on computers,” Charlie said.

“Do you mean he uses a computer?” That could be almost anything.

“I mean he fixes other people’s computers,” Charlie said. “Or something. He says he makes them safe to use. I don’t know why computers wouldn’t be safe to use.”

“Got it.” It had to be some sort of data protection. In Eli’s defense, Maddie could see why that work was important, and why his clients might need him to be available all the time. “That sounds like an important job,” she said.

“Yeah, it is,” Charlie agreed rather importantly, as if he was the one with the job to be proud of. It made Maddie smile — it was nice that he took such pride in his father and his work.

“Is that what you want to do when you grow up?” she asked. “Work with computers like your dad does?”

“No, not really,” Charlie said. “I know it’s an important job, but it seems boring. And he has to work all the time. That’s what he told me — he has to work all the time because of how important his job is. So maybe I want to have a less important job.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And that way, if I have kids someday, I’ll be able to play with them.”

He said it matter-of-factly, but it still made Maddie’s heart break a little. It was clear to her that he was aware of the fact that he was missing something in his relationship

with his father, and that was immensely sad.

Charlie didn't seem to be sad about it, though. He went to the fridge and took out the carton of orange juice. Over the past week, Maddie had come to realize that he was capable of pouring it for himself, so she didn't try to help him. She focused on the toast she was making instead.

"So," she said, "What kind of job might be less important than what your dad does?"

"I don't know," Charlie said. "Maybe a doctor or something."

Maddie choked back a giggle. "I think you could be a great doctor," she told him sincerely.

"You do?"

"I do. But you have to go to school for a long time to become a doctor. Do you like school?"

"Sometimes," he said. "I liked my teacher last year, but everyone says one of the first-grade teachers is mean. So I'm not sure if I'm going to like that or not."

"Maybe the teacher won't be as bad as they say," she suggested.

"Maybe," he agreed.

"And anyway, it's only for one year."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“One year is a long time,” he informed her.

She supposed that was true when you were six. “Well, you have a lot of time to figure out what you want to be when you grow up,” she told him.

“I know. Maybe I’ll be a lifeguard like you were. Is that fun?”

“Very fun,” Maddie said.

“Do you have to go to school for a long time?”

“Not as long as doctors. You need to be a good swimmer, though, so you’ll have to practice that.”

“I’m already a good swimmer.”

“Great! Maybe we can go out to the pool and you can show me.” She had noticed the pool in the backyard on her first day here, and she had been itching to get out and try it. She suspected that Eli would tell her it was fine to go during her downtime, but the fact of the matter was that she hadn’t really had any downtime yet.

That was why she was asking Charlie about Eli’s schedule. It wasn’t only about today. She had gathered that he was a bit of a workaholic, of course, but she hadn’t expected that he would be at the office every morning when she woke up and that he would return home well after Charlie had gone to bed for the night. She was excited to be Charlie’s nanny, but she had also been eager to enjoy the suite of rooms she’d been given — and she had had hardly any time to do that.



What was more, she felt sad for Charlie. It wasn't as if he was neglected. His father clearly cared for him. But not to have an active parent in his life — that was a very sad thing. It made her want to intervene somehow, to talk to Eli about the fact that he was working too much. But she was sure he wouldn't want to listen to her about that. And besides, it wasn't any of her business and she knew it. She should stay out of it.

She put the French toast on the table and Charlie started to dig in. "This is great," he said. "Usually it's just cold cereal for breakfast."

"That's what your old nanny used to make for you?"

"Katie said she wasn't hired to cook," Charlie said. "We'd have cereal for breakfast and sandwiches for lunch. I think it's cool that you make real food."

"I like cooking," Maddie told him. "I don't think I'm great at it or anything, but it can be a lot of fun."

"Maybe you can teach me how to cook something," Charlie said. "Hey, that's a job, right? Being a cook?"

"That's a job. You have a cook who works here in your house!"

"So maybe I can do that when I grow up. Do you have to go to a lot of school to cook?"

"You have to go to special cooking school," Maddie said. "But that's probably a lot of fun, because I bet you get to eat everything you make."

"Oh, that would be fun," Charlie giggled. "Okay, I think I want to become a cook."

"Sounds good to me," Maddie said. "If you want, we can make something together

for lunch.”

“What can we make?”

“Anything you want. How about spaghetti and garlic bread, do you like that?”

“Ooh, yes.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do!”

“Can we still go swimming first?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Maddie smiled. “I haven’t gotten to try the pool yet.”

“I haven’t been in it since Katie left.”

“You haven’t?”

“I’m not allowed without a grown-up. And Dad never has time to take me.”

Somehow, that didn’t surprise Maddie in the least.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

The two of them changed into swimsuits. It was a treat to Maddie to wear a casual suit instead of her usual guard suit, and though she still opted for a one-piece — it seemed a little inappropriate to choose a bikini while she was working — she picked a blue-and-white halter that showed off her tan and felt a little more fun. She met Charlie outside and he cannonballed right into the water while Maddie laid her towel on one of the pool chairs and settled in to sunbathe and supervise.

It was a warm and relaxing day, and she kept one eye on Charlie as she started to relax, but she wasn't paying attention to what was going on behind her, so she was surprised by the sound of a voice.

“That’s a nice swimsuit.”

Maddie sat bolt upright and turned. Eli was standing there.

It was strange — he’d seen her in a swimsuit before, of course, and this one was far from indecent, yet for some reason she was more conscious of the fact that she wasn’t wearing much than she had when they had met on the beach. Instinctively, she grabbed her towel. “I thought you were at work,” she managed.

“I came home to pick up some documents,” he said. “My office looks out on the pool, and I saw the twoof you out here and thought I would come say hello.”

“Dad!” Charlie came splashing over to the side of the pool and climbed out, getting water everywhere. “Are you home from work? Can you come swimming with me?”

The excitement on his face nearly broke Maddie’s heart, especially when Eli shook

his head. “I have to go back to work,” he said. “But it looks like you and Maddie are having a good time, huh?”

Charlie looked disappointed, but not crestfallen, and Maddie could only assume it was because he was used to this from his father. “Yeah,” he said. “We’re going to make spaghetti for lunch.”

“Maybe you’ll save me some.”

“We will!”

“Okay. You two have a fun day swimming,” Eli said. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Maddie doubted it. Eli was never home at a reasonable hour. But she didn’t want to say anything about that in front of Charlie, so she kept quiet.

Eli looked over at her once more.

He seemed to really take her in, looking her up and down as if he was seeing her for the first time, and Maddie was aware once more of the fact that she was wearing nothing but a swimsuit. Eli seemed to be noticing that too. She wondered how it could feel like such a big deal, given the way they had met — but maybe it was because her guard suit was just a work uniform. This suit was one she had specifically bought with the intention of looking and feeling cute — though she hadn’t thought she would ever wear it in front of someone she was working for. She wondered if she would have chosen it if she had known that Eli would be stopping at home. Maybe she would have put on a cover-up.

That was silly. It was just a swimsuit. They were swimming. What else was she supposed to wear?

But even so, she found herself unable to fully relax until Eli had walked away and she and Charlie were on their own once more.

## CHAPTER 7

### ELI

Eli spent the rest of the day thinking about Maddie laying out by the pool and cursing the fact that he couldn't seem to get her off his mind.

He'd found her attractive in her lifeguard suit, but there was a part of him that had long been conditioned not to stare at hot women who were just trying to work. He knew better than that. He had noticed her, but he hadn't let it linger in his mind.

Of course, it was difficult to justify the fact that he was noticing her again now in light of that fact. She wasn't just working — she was working for him. He was her employer, and he had been checking her out as if she was a hottie on the beach.

It embarrassed him to think about the way he had stared at her earlier. He knew that she had noticed it, because he had seen her eyes widen as she had taken it in. He'd seen the way she had reached for her towel, as if she was embarrassed to be seen by him.

And there was no reason she should have been. He'd given a lot of thought to it, trying to decide whether her swimwear had been inappropriate for a nanny, but it hadn't been, of course. It was a pretty swimsuit, but she had been perfectly covered up — nothing he wouldn't have expected to see on any young mother at a pool with her children.

No, he had been the indecent one, looking at her like that. Thinking about her like that now. He was the one who was behaving inappropriately.

Even now, thinking about her made his head spin. All that smooth, tan skin, those perfect curves...

This had never been a problem with Katie. And it wasn't as if she'd been particularly unattractive. He simply hadn't noticed her the way he was noticing Maddie now. She'd been his son's nanny, nothing more. Thinking back about Katie now, it was almost as if he couldn't remember what she'd looked like. He could have described her, of course — skinny, brown hair, freckles — but he couldn't call an image of her to mind.

Meanwhile, Maddie was burned into his thoughts, a filmstrip playing on repeat.

He needed Maddie to be nothing more than a nanny to him. He really couldn't allow himself to think about her like this. It was entirely unprofessional.

He was glad to be coming home late that night, thinking that she might already be in bed. He'd even planned it. He could have gotten away a few hours ago, but — somewhat guilty — he had chosen to stay at the office. He had told himself that he was doing it to catch up on a backlog of emails that needed to be responded to, but that was the kind of thing he would ordinarily have done from home and he knew it. He had stayed away because he wasn't ready to face her again.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

So he was a little surprised to hear the sound of music as he walked through his front door. It was soft enough that he knew Charlie's sleep wouldn't be disturbed by it, and it was pretty and melodic, instrumental stuff, but it was coming from the living room. What was Maddie doing in there?

He went in and stopped in the doorway, taking in the scene.

She had pushed all the furniture back against the walls to create a vast, open space at the center of the room. She was on her toes, and she was dancing — bending and flexing gracefully to the music. She had her back to him, and he watched quietly, not wanting to disturb her — it was a pleasure to watch this. Eli recognized ballet — he'd been to a few performances in his life — and though he didn't know much about the art, he could tell that she was good at it. The point in her toes never went away. Her fingers were fully extended. It was clear that she knew, at every moment, what every part of her body was doing, and that every move she made was intentional.

She turned toward him and stopped in her tracks. "Oh." Her face went bright red with embarrassment at having been walked in on.

"It's all right," he told her. "You don't need to stop." He leaned against the doorframe casually, hoping that she would go on. He had been enjoying the show. And the best part was, there was nothing unprofessional or inappropriate about watching her while she was dancing. It was completely understandable that he should be drawn to that. He didn't have to pretend he hadn't noticed her — at least, not right now.

"I shouldn't have moved the furniture," she said. "I meant to have it all put back before you got home."

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll get it all put back where it was,” he assured her.  
“There’s no hurry.”

“I hope I didn’t damage anything.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. Unless you picked up the armchair and threw it over there.”

“I pushed it.”

“So it’s fine,” he said, offering a smile in hopes of relaxing her a bit. “I’m guessing your room wasn’t big enough for this?”

“I know I’m supposed to stick to my room after hours. I’m sorry.”

“No, hey, that wasn’t what I was saying,” he said. “I just wondered why you chose to dance out here, and I could only guess that there wasn’t enough space for you upstairs.”

“Not really,” she confessed. “I tried dancing in the suite, but that couch is so big that I wasn’t able to move it. Not that I’m complaining,” she added quickly. “It’s a great couch. I love it. But I did need more space.”

“Well, it isn’t a problem. The suite is your private space, but of course you’re welcome to the rest of the house as well. You’re acting as if you’d done something wrong, but I don’t have a problem with you being in here at all.”

“Thanks,” Maddie said, smiling at him. Some of the pink had left her cheeks now, and she looked a bit more relaxed. It only led Eli to notice how sweet her smile was, though. He was sure that smile bewitched everyone who saw it.

Oh, this wasn’t going to be easy. Now he was thinking about her in that swimsuit



again, which was the very thing he had wanted to avoid tonight.

He cleared his throat. "I hadn't realized you were a dancer."

"Oh, I'm not," she said. She actually looked surprised, which made him feel surprised in turn.

"Of course you are," he protested. "No one dances like that without proper training."

"You know about ballet, then?"

"I know about recognizing quality when I see it. You knew what you were doing."

"Okay, that's true," she agreed.

"I knew it. So how long have you been a dancer?"

"I'm really not a dancer," she said. "I used to be. But I'm not anymore."

"You quit? You shouldn't have. You're so good at it."

She looked down at her feet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Was that not okay to say? I wasn't trying to tell you what to do with your life." Maybe he had come across as bossy, but he hadn't meant it that way. "All I was trying to say was that you're really good at this. You're a beautiful dancer." Oh, now he was talking too much. She was going to think he was ridiculous.

And why did he suddenly care so much what she thought, anyway? He couldn't remember the last time he had been this worried about another person's opinion. That had certainly never happened when Katie had been his nanny.

“I didn’t exactly quit,” she said. “I was injured, and I had to stop.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Oh.” He was quiet for a moment as he understood the depth of what she was telling him. He had never been a serious athlete, but he knew how devastating a sports injury could be. No wonder she had been reluctant to talk about her dancing. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. It was a while ago,” she said. “It’s really okay now.”

“You must miss it.” He felt silly, having said that — obviously she missed it. Why else would she be dancing around his living room?

Maddie smiled. “Dance will always be a part of my life,” she said. “I may not be able to be a professional dancer the way I used to dream about, but I still have my love of dancing.”

“That’s a great outlook,” Eli said. “And I can see that you have that. I mean, it’s obvious from the way you dance. You looked really lost in the moment.”

“Yeah, that has a tendency to happen.” She smiled a little sheepishly. “When I’m dancing, it’s like I forget about everything else. I feel like I’m in my own little world.”

“I could tell. You must have been amazing to watch when you were a dancer.”

“I’ll put everything back,” Maddie said. She went over to her phone and picked it up, presumably ready to turn off the music.

“No, don’t,” Eli said hurriedly.

She looked up at him. “Why — do you like the room better this way or something?”

Eli chuckled. “It’s not that,” he said. “I just want you to finish what you were doing.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks colored. “Um, I’m not used to having an audience. I mean, not anymore.”

“No, sorry, I didn’t mean that I was going to stand here and watch you,” he said quickly. “I’m sorry — you’re right, that would be incredibly awkward. I just meant that I wanted you to take the time to finish up what you were doing. Enjoy your time dancing. You work all day, and I know you must be glad to get some time to yourself — I’ll get out of your way.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t be doing this here,” she confessed. “It was different when you weren’t home. Now I feel like I’m driving you out of your own living room.”

“You’re not doing anything of the kind,” he assured her. “I was going to go take a shower anyway. It’s been a long day and I could stand to relax a bit. You finish practicing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely sure. And don’t worry about moving the furniture back when you’re done,” he added. “My house cleaner is coming tomorrow, and this will make it easier for her to vacuum in here. You’ve done me a favor.”

“Okay, but I will put everything back when the cleaning is finished,” she vowed.

Eli nodded, knowing that he wasn’t going to let her do that either. It wouldn’t be very chivalrous to allow her to move all that furniture by herself. At the very least, he would help her with it.

Or maybe he would leave these things where they were. If she couldn't practice dance in her suite, she ought to have a space. He could also think of clearing the boxes out of the big upstairsroom that had probably been intended by the house's builders to be used as a conservatory. Eli had never had any use for that space — he didn't play any instruments. He'd thought of getting a piano and starting Charlie on lessons, but it was one of those things that had gotten lost among the everyday responsibilities of trying to balance his job and fatherhood.

If Maddie needed a dance studio, though, maybe that was a space that could be converted. It was definitely an idea worth thinking about.

He wondered what she would say if he were to suggest that idea. It seemed likely, based on everything he had observed from her so far, that she would try to refuse the offer — but maybe if he made the arrangements without telling her she would like that. He doubted whether she would refuse to dance in the conservatory if he had already turned it into an appropriate space for her.

He went upstairs to take his shower, his head spinning, his mind full of ideas.

It seemed like something out of a fantasy that his new nanny had turned out to be such a deeply attractive, sensual woman.

But that was a fantasy Eli knew he couldn't afford to indulge.

She's the nanny, he told himself firmly. She works here. This is her job.

And he couldn't afford to risk losing her as a nanny, not now that he had found someone who seemed to fit in so well, someone who suited their family's needs. Someone who understood Charlie, and who Charlie liked. That wasn't something he was willing to give up, no matter how attractive she was. He was just going to have to keep these feelings under control, that was all there was to it.

He turned on the shower and stepped under the spray to wash away the stress of his day — and, hopefully, all these errant thoughts about Maddie Foster.

But by the time he stepped out, his thoughts were no more under control than they had been. He could still hear the sound of distant music coming from downstairs as he left the bathroom, and he knew she was still dancing. It made him want to go down and see her again.

It made him want to spend time with her.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

The next thing he knew, he was halfway down the stairs on his way to ask his nanny — his devastatingly lovely nanny — to join him for an evening glass of wine.

### CHAPTER 8

ELI

“Red or white?”

“Oh, whatever you’re having is fine,” Maddie said quickly. “I don’t want you to feel like you need to open two bottles.”

“No, I won’t,” Eli said. “But you’re my guest, and I’d like to give you whatever you’d enjoy most here.”

“Red, then.”

Eli nodded and uncorked the bottle. He pulled down a pair of glasses and poured a measure of wine into each of them, and then he handed one to Maddie.

She took a sip. “This is really good,” she said.

“I’m glad you like it.” It was one of his nicer bottles, and a part of Eli’s mind was aware of the fact that it was strange — unusual — for him to be opening such a nice bottle for somebody else. It was the kind of thing he would usually have saved for a holiday, or a special occasion when he’d have had the chance to show it off to a lot of guests. To open this bottle on a whim because he had decided to have a drink with his

nanny — well, there was so much about that that was unprecedented, he didn't quite know where to begin to address it.

“Do you know a lot about wine?” he asked her. Maybe he had sensed a fellow enthusiast.

She laughed. “I know nothing about wine. My roommate Tess and I have been drinking box wine since college.”

“Well, it's definitely going to be better than that,” he agreed. Internally, he was forced to shake his head at himself. She wasn't interested in wine — at least not in the terms he'd been thinking of it. She didn't have fancy tastes. He could have given her anything at all and she would have appreciated it.

And yet, he found that he didn't regret his decision to offer up the good stuff. He was glad he had opened one of his nice bottles for Maddie.

At some point, he was going to have to explore why he was feeling that way. But not right now.

“Do you want anything else?” he asked her. “Something to eat? I could cut up a couple of cheese pairings.” As long as he was going all out, he might as well do it right.

“You don't have to do all that,” she said.

“I do have some cheeses that go well with this,” he said. “And it wouldn't be any trouble. You've been working out, and I don't want you to be hungry, especially late at night.”

“It's nice of you to take the trouble,” Maddie said. “It really isn't necessary, though. I



don't tend to feel that hungry after I've been dancing."

"All right," he agreed. "Just let me know if you change your mind."

"Will do."

He sipped his wine, trying not to stare at her. Even the way she held the glass was alluring — delicately, between her fingertips, as if she was holding the stem of a flower. He wanted to watch every move she made. He knew that he couldn't, though. He had to do what he could to keep the distance between the two of them. She wasn't on the clock now, but she was still his employee, and there was no getting around that fact. He had to make sure to treat her professionally at all times. And that was more important now than ever, with the two of them sitting here with an open bottle of wine. They were courting disaster, if they weren't careful.

Not that anything would happen between them. Eli might be feeling things he shouldn't, but there was no reason to allow himself to believe that Maddie was. She was probably in her right mind, even if he wasn't.

"Is Charlie still asleep?" she asked.

"Yeah, I looked in on him when I got out of the shower. Out like a light." Eli was grateful for the change of subject. At least Charlie was something they could talk about without things feeling weird between them. What was more, they should be talking about Charlie. That actually was keeping things professional.

Maddie smiled. "He's such a cool kid," she said. "You've done an amazing job with him. I hope you know that."

"He is pretty great," Eli agreed.

But he wasn't sure how much credit he could actually take for the way his son had turned out. He was proud of Charlie, of course — but he also knew he hadn't done as much of the work of raising him as he should have. He hadn't been around for that much of Charlie's growing up so far. The hands-on stuff had been left mostly to nannies, and every time Eli felt pride in his son, he had to wrestle with a competing feeling of shame over the fact that he couldn't take responsibility for how great Charlie was turning out.

That wasn't something he needed to unpack with Maddie, though, even if it did make him feel slightly guilty to receive her praise. "I've been so happy with everything he's done so far," he said instead. "He's incredibly smart."

"I can tell. He's a great reader. I feel like that's always the best way to tell with a kid his age — not even how much skill they have at reading, but how much enthusiasm they have for it. I've seen him sit with a book for a solid hour. The first time I saw it, I thought he might be looking at the pictures."

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Oh, no, he reads them,” Eli said. “He’s really into that series about the dragons.”

“I’ve noticed that! You know, kids who like that series usually like the Magic in the Woods series. Have you heard of it?”

“I haven’t.”

“It’s age appropriate. Would you mind if I picked up the first one for him to see if he’s interested? Or do you like to read books yourself before giving them to him?”

Was that something Eli was supposed to be doing? He’d never done that before, and he felt another pang of guilt. “I trust your judgment,” he said. “I’ll give you some money for it. And if he likes it, we can get the rest of the series.”

“That’s great,” Maddie said. “They’re some of my favorite children’s books. Really great. To be honest, you should check them out yourself in your free time.”

“Maybe I will.” He wouldn’t. What free time was she talking about? If he had free time, he would be spending it at home with Charlie, not reading books. “So you and Charlie have been bonding well?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah. We had a great time today.”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you sound surprised? You know what a great kid he is!”

“Yeah, I do, I just don’t always get to hear it from other people,” Eli said. “I don’t know if I can express how nice it is to hear that someone likes your kid.” Damn, she wasn’t making it easy not to fall for her. Beautiful, smart, and she loved Charlie? Eli wasn’t looking for love, but if he had been, that would check all the boxes.

Not that he was falling for her. This thing he had been feeling lately was a passing thing, nothing more. She was attractive and had a great personality, that was all it was. It didn’t mean he was going to forget himself. It didn’t mean he was going to forget the nature of their relationship — strictly business.

She ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass.

Just that little gesture made Eli feel like his heart had missed a beat.

I’m in big trouble.

He cleared his throat. “Tell me what you and Charlie did today,” he suggested. “You mentioned that you were going to cook lunch together.”

“Yeah, we did. We saved some for you, like you asked. I can reheat it — although I’m guessing you probably don’t want a big spaghetti dinner this late at night.”

“Maybe I’ll take it to work with me tomorrow,” he suggested. “I appreciate you setting some aside.”

She bit her lip and hesitated. “If you do take it... I think you should let Charlie know what you think of it once you’ve eaten it,” she said. “I know he was so excited for that. He’d be thrilled to hear that you enjoyed it. He would get a real kick out of that.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” Eli agreed.

The truth was that he appreciated her saying so, because it was something he might not have thought to do on his own. It was slightly embarrassing to realize that. Of course he should compliment his son on the meal — was this Charlie's very first time cooking something? God, he didn't even know the answer to that.

"You know, he thinks the world of you," Maddie said. "He talks about you all the time — only good things. He thinks you hung the moon."

"I'm sure all little boys feel that way about their fathers."

"To a degree, maybe, but you should know that he really does admire you. I hope you appreciate that, because I don't think it's something to be taken for granted. Not that I know much about what it's like to be a father. I just see the way he looks up to you, and I think if I had a child, that would mean everything to me. I don't want you to miss out on noticing that."

Eli nodded. Maybe Maddie was right to question his parenting — as bad as that made him feel. She was right that the admiration she was describing wasn't something he paid a lot of attention to. He wouldn't have said he didn't notice it, but he didn't think about it — and he should.

"Did he have fun cooking?" he asked her.

She nodded. "He had a great time. He's been saying he wants to become a cook when he grows up." She glanced at him quickly.

"What?" Eli frowned. "You look like you have something else to say."

"No, it's just... I didn't know how you were going to react to that," she said. "The idea of him becoming a cook."

“Well, he’s six. It’s not like he’s going off to culinary school tomorrow.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Yeah, I know. I just wasn’t sure if you wanted him to... I don’t know. Follow in your footsteps. Take over the family business.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t mean to encourage him onto a different path, if that’s not something you wanted. I should have thought about that, or maybe asked you first.”

“It’s all right,” Eli assured her. “I’m not expecting him to go into tech. I don’t even know if I would want him to. It hasn’t made me that happy.”

“You don’t like your job?” Maddie frowned.

“It’s a job.”

“I just assumed it meant a lot to you. You put so much of your time into it.”

“I know. It’s what I’m good at, and I do care about doing well in my career. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved, and what my company does for people. But it’s not as if it’s something I’m so passionate about that I feel like my son needs to go into the same line of work. I’d rather he do whatever makes him happy, and if that turns out to be cooking, that’s fine with me.”

“I think that’s great of you,” Maddie said. “It’s good that he has that kind of support.”

“Did you have that kind of support?” Eli asked her. “I mean, did your parents get behind your dream of being a dancer? Or did they want you to do something else?”

“They were doubtful about it at first,” Maddie said. “They didn’t know if I was going to be able to make a career out of it. But once they heard enough positive feedback from my instructors, they did get on board. They were proud of me, and they supported my dreams.”

“You all must have been devastated when you were injured. What happened?”

“I fell,” Maddie said simply. “I had a bad landing after a leap, and I knew immediately that something was wrong — I felt it.”

“That sounds awful.”

“There are some things you just can’t recover from and go on dancing at that level,” Maddie said. “I’ll always be able to dance for fun, but... I had my sights set on being a professional ballerina, and I’m just not anywhere near that level now. My body won’t do the things it would have to do.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Maddie said. “I’ve done my best with it. And if I’m able to open up a dance studio, that will make up for everything.”

“You’re trying to open a dance studio?”

“That’s the new dream,” she said. “Now that I can’t be a dancer myself, I want to teach young dancers. Help mold the next generation.” She grinned. “Maybe that’s a little silly.”

“I don’t think it’s silly,” Eli said earnestly. “I think remarkable. A lot of people who had been through what you have would probably turn their back on dance.”



“I could never do that,” Maddie said. “It’s the greatest passion of my life. Whatever else happens, dance will always be a part of me. I’ll never be able to let that go.”

## CHAPTER 9

ELI

“You’re home early,” Maddie observed.

“I was able to get away.” Eli set his briefcase on the end table in the foyer. It felt much later than it was. He was used to walking into the house at ten o’clock or later, but tonight it was only eight thirty. “Is Charlie still up?”

“He’s not, I’m afraid,” Maddie said. “He’s been going to bed a little early these past few days.”

“Oh, really? How come?”

“Active days, I think,” Maddie said. “He’s been giving me the impression that he didn’t do as much on a daily basis with his last nanny.”

“That’s probably true,” Eli said. “I mean, I didn’t spend as much time with Katie as I have with you, and we didn’t talk that much about what they were doing together. But I know they didn’t cook together, and you and Charlie have made something of a routine out of that.”

“It’s true,” Maddie agreed. “We made a risotto today.”

“You made arisotto?”

“Well, not a very good one.” Maddie grinned sheepishly. “It’s only the third time I’ve ever tried to make risotto.”

“Did Charlie eat that?”

“He did, actually! I think he liked it.”

“I’m surprised. A kid of his age eating something like that, I mean.”

“He’s got an adventurous palate, actually. You didn’t know?”

“I guess I didn’t,” Eli confessed.

Maddie didn’t express any surprise at the fact that he hadn’t known this about his son. Eli supposed she had gotten used to the fact that he didn’t know Charlie as well as he should. In the beginning, a story like this one would have prompted her to give him a strange look, but now she took it in stride. Eli didn’t know whether to feel better or worse about that. It was nice not to be constantly confronted with the fact that he was falling short of what she considered to be good parenting, of course. But on the other hand, it meant that Maddie had come to consider that sort of thing the norm from him. She had stopped looking for more than the bare minimum.

It was strange the way he had found himself wanting to impress her. He wanted to be a good father for Charlie’s sake, of course, but he also wanted Maddie to see him that way. He wanted her to look at him as a good parent, and to admire his relationship

with Charlie. Little things like the fact that he didn't understand his son's eating habits were a source of embarrassment to him.

"I guess I still thought Charlie's favorite foods were pizza and hot dogs," he said.

"Oh, I think those are his favorites," Maddie laughed. "Yesterday we made macaroni and cheese from a box and had it with tomato soup, and he told me it was the best thing we've cooked together so far."

"Oh yeah?" Eli would keep that in mind. "Maybe we should put more of that box macaroni on the shopping list."

"That might be a good idea. He loves kid food like that. But he's also willing to try unfamiliar things, and that's a little more unique for a kid his age. I guess it comes with the lifestyle he's had."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know." Maddie bit her lip and looked hesitant.

It was a complicated thing — Eli didn't want her to feel hesitant to speak up, but at the same time, he was always so charmed when she made that face. It made him want to reach out to her, to reassure her that she didn't need to feel any hesitation about saying whatever was on her mind. He wanted her to be comfortable talking to him about anything at all.

He waited, hoping that she would get over whatever was giving her pause. Trusting that she would. Maddie was confident and outspoken, and she always seemed to find the strength to say what needed to be said.

And this time, apparently, was no exception. "I just mean that Charlie is a kid who's

been raised with a lot of resources,” she explained. “A lot of opportunity. He’s been exposed to things most kids his age haven’t.”

“Oh, I see.” She was talking about the fact that he had money. No wonder it had made her feel a bit awkward.

“I’m not sure how aware you are about it,” Maddie said. “I’m sure it was the same for you growing up as it is for Charlie now, so you wouldn’t have the context of what a more typical childhood is like. I’m sure you grew up with the same kind of exposure to nice things as Charlie has had. And that’s a good thing,” she added quickly. “This isn’t criticism — of your upbringing or of his.”

“It wasn’t like that for me at all, actually,” Eli said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re talking as if you’re imagining that my parents had a lot of money when I was growing up, but it wasn’t like that for my family.”

“Oh,” Maddie said. “I’m sorry. I guess I was making an assumption. It’s just a little hard to picture you as middle-class.”

Eli shook his head. “Not middle-class.”

“No?”

Eli took a deep breath in and released it slowly. This was something he tried hard not to think about. It was something he had fought long and hard to leave in the past. He hadn’t spoken aloud about this part of his life in years.

“My father left when I was a baby,” he explained. “I was only a year old — I have no

memory of him. My mother raised me on her own. She worked as a waitress — night shifts — so that she could be at home with me during the day.”

“Oh,” Maddie said softly. “I didn’t realize. I guess I thought...”

“You thought I had always had money.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Well... you seem so at home in this life.” Maddie looked rather apologetic. “I didn’t mean to imply anything — to offend you.”

“You didn’t offend me. You didn’t say anything wrong.”

“Still, I shouldn’t have made the assumption that just because your life looks the way it does right now, it’s always been the same. It sounds like you overcame a lot.”

“It was hard growing up like that,” Eli said. It was tough to admit it. He hadn’t spoken like this to anyone in such a long time that it almost felt impossible that he was saying these things right now. It felt like something he would have daydreamed about saying, but not something he would ever have actually said.

And yet, it was happening, and he knew why. It was because of Maddie. She brought it out in him. She made him feel secure and confident enough that it was suddenly easy to open up about things that had happened a long time ago. Things that he had done his best to make himself forget.

Maddie was watching him, as though she intuited that he had more he wanted to say. And, Eli realized, he did. It had been so long since he had spoken about any of this, and he didn’t want to waste the moment now that it was here.

“The truth is,” he said, “it wasn’t always that bad. My mom and I were very close. I could feel, every day, how hard she was working for both of us. I grew up with such an appreciation for all her hard work. She’s always been my hero. But I also knew just how exhausting it was for her to be in that position. I can remember waking up in the morning on days when she hadn’t made it home from work yet. I would pour

myself a bowl of cereal and she'd come in while I was eating it. She'd be dead on her feet. I have such a vivid memory of her collapsing into a kitchen chair at the end of her work day. I would get up and pour her a bowl of cereal, and even though I can imagine that's probably the last thing she wanted after a whole day of work, she would always sit and eat it and talk to me. She'd tell me stories about her customers, and she would ask me what I was looking forward to from the day ahead. I'm sure all she wanted was to collapse into bed, but she always made sure to take that time with me."

"She sounds like a very special woman."

"I don't think one woman in a thousand could equal her," Eli said.

"Are you still close?"

"She died a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear it."

"Thank you. I'm most sad about it when I think about the fact that she won't get to see Charlie grow up. She loved him so much, and he won't have many memories of her — though we have lots of pictures, of course." He sighed. "Charlie has had a lot of loss in his life."

"It always makes me so sad to see that he's without his mother," Maddie agreed. "He's such a sweet kid. That must have been a very difficult thing for him to adjust to."

"It's been hard," Eli agreed. "And it's something else I feel bad about when I look at him. It's hard that he's away from me so much of the time, of course, but it's also hard to see that he's lost his mother. I just want to make sure that my son has

everything in the world. And I know that, no matter how much I do — no matter how hard I work — he won't have that."

"I see," Maddie murmured.

"You do?" What did she see?

"I just mean... this makes so much sense of the way you work so hard," she explained. "With the way you grew up, of course you would do that. And especially with Charlie having suffered so many losses so early in life. I understand now. You want to make sure you provide him the best life possible — that you give him everything. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," Eli agreed, happy that she had seen it — that she truly did seem to understand. She knew that he wasn't working so hard out of selfishness or carelessness. It was all from a desire to provide Charlie with the sort of life and opportunities that he himself had never been given.

He would always remember what it had been like to go to bed hungry when his mother's tips at the restaurant hadn't been good. He would always remember the duty he had felt to pretend he didn't need anything to eat so that his mother wouldn't feel too bad about the fact that she hadn't been able to buy groceries. He'd had friends at school who had felt bad about the meager lunches he used to bring and had given him an apple or a bag of chips from their own lunchbox. He had never wanted to allow his mother to know that was happening, because he had known how sad and ashamed she would feel about it, and he hated to think of the look that would appear on her face if she heard.

And when he had gotten older, he had vowed to himself that his own family would never go through the things he had.



It was the reason he'd worked so hard. He'd put in effort all through high school to make sure he would have the kind of grades that would enable him to earn a scholarship to a good college, knowing that his mother would never be able to afford to send him. He had spent months applying for scholarships and financial aid, and when he had gotten to school, he had thrown himself into his studies, all to make sure that he would be able to walk away with a great career. His plan had been that he would be able to care for a wife and children someday, but things hadn't happened that way — his son had come along before he'd found a woman he had any romantic interest in. Still, it had been good to know that his hard work would pay off, and that Charlie would never want for anything.

"I can hardly blame you," Maddie said.

"You thought it was something other than that," Eli deduced.

"Well, yes, if you want to know. I sort of thought you were just a workaholic, or in love with your job or something. I thought you cared more about your job than you do about Charlie. But I get it now. You work as hard as you do because you care about Charlie."

"I don't want him to go through the things I went through," Eli said. "I wouldn't want it for anyone, but especially not my kid. I want to protect him from all the difficult and painful things in life. He should only ever experience good things."

"You know that isn't going to happen. Bad things happen to everyone. Charlie isn't going to be exempt from that."

"I know that," Eli said. "I know I can't protect him from everything. But I'm his father. It's my job to protect him from as many things as I possibly can. And if that means I'm going to have to work all day every day for the rest of my life... well, I guess that's just what I'm going to have to do. I care about Charlie more than anything

in the world, and I'll do whatever I need to do to make sure he has the best life possible."

## CHAPTER 10

MADDIE

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

By the time Maddie's first month working for Eli had ended, things had begun to change around the house. She had gotten used to Eli's new pattern of coming home earlier in the evening. Some nights — though not every night — he was home early enough to put Charlie to bed, a surprise that always left Charlie ecstatic. When it happened, Maddie did her best to get out of the way so that the two of them could make the most of their time together. She had come to a new appreciation of how much Eli really did care for his son — she could see it in everything he did now, in ways she genuinely hadn't been able to before. The story he had shared about his past had changed everything for her.

Of course he wanted the best for Charlie. He wasn't simply a workaholic who never spared a thought for his son. It was so much more complicated than that. Eli wanted everything for Charlie, and the best way he knew how to provide that was by making sure there was always enough money.

And to be fair to him, Maddie knew, that was important. Because of Eli's success in his career, Charlie would never be hungry. He would always have the best education, and his future would be whatever he wanted it to be. If he didn't get to spend so much time with his father — well, to Eli, that probably seemed like an acceptable price to pay. Maybe it was an acceptable price to pay. What did Maddie know about it? She wasn't a parent.

It was Tuesday evening, and she found herself alone in the kitchen cleaning up. Eli wasn't home from work yet, and Charlie had gone to bed disappointed at not being able to see him. Maddie had considered asking Eli to try to schedule the specific days he would be able to come home early in order to make things easier for his son. That way, Charlie wouldn't have to deal with getting his hopes up only to be let down.

She hadn't been able to find a way to ask Eli that, though. It wasn't as if she couldn't see that he was trying, and she very much did not want to call him out when he was starting to change his habits and make a real effort to be there for his son. That was something that ought to be rewarded, not nitpicked.

Eli came into the kitchen, startling her, and she whirled to face him. "I didn't hear you come in," she said.

"I came in quietly," he admitted. "I know I'm a little later than usual tonight, and I thought Charlie might be sleeping."

"Yeah, he is."

He cursed softly. "I thought he might be, but I still hoped."

Allowing herself a slight risk, Maddie said, "I know he was hoping for that too. He wanted to see you."

"I'll try to get home earlier tomorrow. Did you guys cook something today?"

"No, we painted, actually. You didn't tell me he had an art studio."

"It's hardly a studio. Just a few supplies in the corner of his play room."

"Nice supplies," Maddie said. "Acrylic paints, quality brushes, an easel, stretched canvases — and everything untouched. I'm surprised you bought all that when he didn't have a passion for painting before today."

"I read a parenting book that gave a list of ideas for things you should buy for your kid at each age, and art supplies were on the list." Eli shrugged. "I just got everything the clerk at the store said I should get."

“When did this happen?”

“When he turned five.”

“And he’s never touched any of it, in all that time,” Maddie marveled.

“I figured he would get to it when he was ready for it.”

“I think he hardly knew it was there, to tell you the truth. That playroom is so full of toys and games that he’s not sure what he has. I was the one who set out the art supplies, and once he saw them, he got interested.” Maddie shrugged. “Anyway, he wants to show you what he painted. He’s been talking about it all day.”

“What did he paint?”

“He won’t tell me. I mean, I’ve seen it, but when I asked him to talk to me about it, he got all quiet and mysterious and said he was only going to tell you about it,” Maddie said. “He’s saving it for you.”

“That’s sweet of him.”

“Yeah, so I would just make sure he gets the chance to show it to you sometime soon.”

“I will.” He offered her a small smile, and Maddie felt relieved. When she had first come to work here, saying something like that to her boss would have felt as if she was stepping out of line, telling him how he should care for his son. It didn’t feel like that anymore, though. Now she knew that he welcomed her input. He was glad for her to tell him the things she noticed about Charlie, about what he needed and how Eli could be more active in his role as father. His desire to be a good parent was more powerful than his ego, and that was a good thing to know about him.

It didn't help her with the fact that she couldn't seem to stop daydreaming about him.

It had helped a little to think of Eli as cold and uncaring, to imagine that he was the kind of man who didn't appreciate his child, because of course there was only so much she could feel for someone like that. But that barrier had been stripped away now, and she saw him for the person he was. He was someone who wanted, more than anything, to care for Charlie, and that made her admire him so much more than she might have done otherwise.

She turned away to finish washing the dishes.

"Leave that," Eli said. "I'll do it."

"This is my job," she pointed out. It was true — taking care of minor household chores was included in her job description.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“You’ve worked all day,” Eli said. “I can do the dishes. Come and have a glass of wine with me.”

He was doing this more and more often — offering to open a bottle of wine for her at the end of the day, or inviting her to sit down with him as he ate a late dinner. It was something Maddie had come to enjoy, but she also knew that she probably shouldn’t be doing it as much as she was. She should tell him no, but she couldn’t seem to bring herself to do that, because the truth was that she wanted that experience. She wanted him to come home in time to see Charlie, but at the same time, she wanted him to come home after Charlie was in bed so that the two of them could spend time together.

Maddie had also noticed that Eli never worked as late as he once had these days. Even on the nights when she was sure he must know he was going to miss out on seeing Charlie, he was making an effort to get home earlier.

She could only think of one possible reason for that — it had to be because he wanted to spend more time with her.

She took a seat at the table, feeling slightly uneasy about the choice she was making but incapable of choosing anything else. Eli went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle that was shorter and narrower than a standard wine bottle.

He noticed her looking at it. “It’s a dessert wine,” he explained. “I don’t always like these, but as a special treat, they can be really nice.”

“Are you supposed to have dessert with it?”

“Yes. I brought home a tiramisu.”

“You did?” She hadn’t expected that at all.

Eli pointed to a bag on the counter that he must have brought in with him — it hadn’t been there before, but she hadn’t noticed it when he had come in. “I had my assistant pick it up and bring it to the office for me,” he said. “One of the nicest in the city. Have you been to this restaurant?”

She checked out the logo on the bag. It wasn’t a name she was familiar with. “I haven’t.”

“I’m going to have to take you sometime,” he said.

Maddie didn’t know quite what to say to that. Having a glass of wine at the end of the day was one thing, but was he talking about taking her out to a fancy dinner? Surely that was crossing the bounds of professionalism.

If Eli was aware of it, he showed no sign of it. He cut into the tiramisu and put pieces of it onto plates. He placed one of them in front of her and gave her a fork. “I hope you like it,” he said. “It’s supposed to be the best around.”

She waited while he poured the wine. “The truth is, I don’t think I would know a good tiramisu from a chocolate pudding,” she admitted. “I haven’t had it more than twice in my life.”

“Oh. You’re not a fan?”

“It isn’t that,” Maddie said. “It’s just not something that we really did in my family. My mom’s idea of dessert was a fruit salad with some whipped cream — which I also really enjoyed — so we didn’t have decadent stuff like this.” She took a bite and then



sipped the wine. Eli was right — the two did pair well together.

“What about your father?” Eli asked.

Maddie shook her head. “He was more of a dessert guy, but he died when I was fourteen.”

“Oh, Maddie. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No reason you would. I never brought it up to you until now.” She shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I don’t think about it as much as I once did.”

“But you do still think about it?”

“I’ll always think about it, to some degree. He was my father. He meant everything to me.”

“You were close, then?”

“Very close.” She hesitated. It was a difficult thing to talk about, even now. “He was my biggest fan,” she said. “My biggest supporter. When I used to talk about my plans to become a dancer, Dad was always the one who told me I could do it.”

“You said it took your parents a while to get on board with the idea.”

“That was mostly my mom. Really, Dad was with me from the start. He told me I was the world’s best dancer and that I could do anything I wanted to do — things that obviously weren’t exactly true, of course, but when you’re a little girl and your father tells you that you can do no wrong, you believe it.”

“I’d imagine,” Eli said quietly.

“I couldn’t be more grateful for everything he gave me,” Maddie said. “If not for my dad and his influence in my life, I don’t think I would have been brave enough to pursue a career in dance in the first place. And even though I wasn’t able to make that dream come true, the amount of time I spent trying is something I’m not ever going to forget. The training I got from it has been invaluable. And then there’s just the relationship I had with my dad. That’s been one of the most important experiences of my life. I don’t know what I would have done without him.”

Eli was quiet, staring into his wine glass.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

It was only then that Maddie realized the weight behind what she had said — the thing he might have heard. He might think that she had been implying, yet again, that there was something wrong with the way he was raising Charlie. He might think she was drawing comparisons between himself and her own father.

She put her wine glass down and leaned in, anxious to correct any misunderstanding. “I don’t mean to say that — well, I wasn’t trying to say anything, really,” she said.

Eli raised his eyebrows, looking faintly amused. “What is it you weren’t trying to say?”

Oh, hell. “I just mean that... we were talking about you and Charlie, and then we were talking about me and my father, and I didn’t mean to suggest that the two situations were the same.”

“No, it sounds as if they could hardly be more different, according to you!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

But he was smiling. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not angry. You make a good point. I think so much about the things I want to provide for my son, but I sometimes forget that the most important thing I can give him is the memory of a childhood full of happiness. I want him to know that he was loved. It sounds like you never doubted that.”

“I never did,” Maddie agreed quietly.

“Thank you.” Eli’s tone was sincere. “Truly, I appreciate you sharing that.”

He reached out and rested his hand on top of hers for a moment.

Maddie breathed in sharply. What did this mean?

She should pull away from him — she should hurry up to her room, and never mind the wine and tiramisu.

She didn’t want to go.

She waited for him to break the contact between the two of them — but he wasn’t breaking it. It was almost as if he wasn’t even aware that this new line had been crossed.

What am I doing? For God’s sake, I could lose my livelihood over this. I could lose my place to live. What would I do then?

That realization broke through the cloud that had surrounded her thoughts. She removed her hand from his and got to her feet. “I ought to go to bed,” she murmured. “This was?—”

But she couldn’t think what to say. How could she describe it? What had it been?

Maddie turned and hurried away, but the feeling of palpable tension followed her.

## CHAPTER 11

### ELI

“You really don’t have to work all day?” Charlie asked, unable to disguise the

excitement in his tone.

“I really don’t.” Eli could hardly believe it himself. It felt like he was forgetting something vital, walking away from work for the day like this, and yet it had been surprisingly easy to do. He had put his mailbox on do not disturb and arranged for his messages to be forwarded to his secretary and one of his associates. Between the two of them, they would be able to handle anything that came through, and he should be fine to take the day off.

A real day off. When was the last time he’d had one?

He wasn’t sure — but he was looking forward to it.

“Can we spend the whole day here?” Charlie asked.

“Maybe not the whole day,” Eli laughed.

“But you don’t have to get back home for work!”

“That’s true, but I think you’d get tired if you were on the beach all day long.”

“I would not,” Charlie insisted. “I want to stay all day.”

“We’ll see,” Eli said. “We’ll see how you feel in a few hours.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

Charlie turned to face Maddie instead. “Maddie, can we stay all day?”

Maddie laughed. “Your dad is in charge, you know, Charlie.”

“I thought you were both in charge.”

“Well, I happen to agree with him, anyway. Let’s see how we all feel after a few hours. I’m not sure any of us are up to a whole day here.”

She glanced at Eli.

He looked away quickly, knowing what she must be thinking. When he had told her that he’d made arrangements to have the day off, she had raised her eyebrows and said nothing, and he’d gotten the feeling that she didn’t quite believe it.

If he was honest with himself, he knew he couldn’t blame her for doubting. He hadn’t shown himself to be reliable about this.

Today was different. Today he really would be spending the whole day with Charlie. What she’d said about her own father the other night — about losing him so young and the memories that had stayed with her — that had really affected him. He had always thought of his relationship with Charlie as something he had forever to get right, but they didn’t, of course. Even if they were lucky and nothing tragic interceded, as it had with Maddie and her own father, Charlie was getting older every day. One day, the mere fact of time passing would take the two of them away from one another, and Eli would never get these years back.

He was determined to make the most of them.

“I’m going to get some shells so that we can decorate a sandcastle,” Charlie announced.

“Don’t go any farther than...” Eli eyed the beach. “See that striped umbrella down there?”

“Yeah.”

“No farther than that.” They had come to a fairly secluded beach today — it wasn’t the one where Charlie had first met Maddie. Eli still felt spooked from having temporarily misplaced his son that day, and knew that it would be easier to relax on a beach with fewer people. Here, at least, he wouldn’t have to fear that anyone had snatched Charlie up — the striped umbrella, several yards off, was the closest person in either direction. “And no going in the water,” he added severely. “Don’t even get your feet wet. I mean it.”

“Aw, Dad.”

“I’m not joking. If you want to go into the water, you come back here and Maddie or I will take you. You can go down the beach a ways to collect shells, but you stay out of the water. Am I understood?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Okay, then. Have a good time.”

Charlie trotted off down the beach. Eli watched him go. Without taking his eyes off of him, he asked, “Do you think I’m making a mistake?”

“A mistake? What mistake?” Maddie was setting out beach chairs.

“Letting him go off on his own. That’s what I did last time, and it didn’t turn out so well.”

“Well, things are different this time,” Maddie said. “We’re on a private beach for one thing — I can’t understand why you brought him to the public beach in the first place, to tell you the truth. It’s not as if you can’t afford the membership fee to this place.”

“It’s where his old nanny took him,” Eli explained. “I never bothered with membership fees to exclusive beaches because it wasn’t something I thought about, and because I wasn’t usually the one going, so I didn’t care.”

“But that experience got you to change your mind?”

“Something like that. That and the fact that I just don’t want to spend my day on a packed beach like the one where you used to work.”

“Well, I have to admit, this is a lot nicer than what I used to deal with every day,” Maddie said. “And it makes it easier to keep an eye on Charlie.” She glanced at Eli. “I guess it probably makes it a little easier for you to focus on checking your emails, too.”

“No,” he said, eyebrows lifting. “I told you that I’m not working today, remember?”

“I mean, yeah, I remember that conversation.”

“I knew you didn’t believe me.”

“Well, can you blame me?”



“Just because I haven’t done a good job at prioritizing my home life in the past doesn’t mean I am incapable of it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“That isn’t what I meant,” Maddie said. “It’s not that I thought you couldn’t step away from work if you wanted to, but...”

“You didn’t think I wanted to.” Eli felt frustrated.

Maddie bit her lip, that captivating affectation that always made Eli forget exactly what he had been talking about. “It’s just... I mean, you didn’t give me the day off.”

“You wanted a day off? You usually work Fridays. And you didn’t say anything about it.”

“But if you meant to be with Charlie all day, and to give him your full attention, you wouldn’t need me,” Maddie pointed out. “I assumed you had kept me working because you planned not to be fully present.”

Eli felt like an idiot. Of course, she was perfectly right. It made sense that she would have thought exactly that. And for that matter, why hadn’t he told her to take the day off? He didn’t need a nanny today — he was planning to spend the whole day with Charlie.

The answer came to him as soon as he had posed himself the question, and it made him feel tense and unhappy to have to admit it.

He hadn’t sent Maddie off for the day for the very simple reason that he wanted to have her around. When he had imagined this day, she had been a part of it.

He didn’t need her to help him care for Charlie today — but he wanted her along

anyway.

And he had no idea how he ought to feel about that fact.

“Now are you glad we left the beach?” Maddie asked Charlie.

Charlie nodded, kicking his feet against one of the benches at the skateboard park. He jumped in the air and tried to spin around before landing. Eli was impressed — he nearly managed it, but he tripped over his own feet at the end. Undaunted, he sprang back up. “Can I get a skateboard, Dad?”

“I’ll think about it.” Eli wasn’t sure how he felt about Maddie exposing Charlie to such a dangerous sport. On one hand, Charlie clearly loved it. He’d been ooh-ing and ahh-ing at the skaters since they had arrived.

“I want to learn how to do tricks,” Charlie pressed.

“Until you have a board of your own, there are plenty of things we can work on to get you ready,” Maddie told him.

“There are?” Charlie asked eagerly.

Eli turned to face Maddie too, interested in where this might be going.

“That jump you just did,” Maddie said. “I can help you learn to do it right, if you want.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Sure I do. I used to be a ballet dancer.”

“Skateboarding isn’t ballet!”

“Well, it kind of is! It’s all about knowing exactly where you are in the air so that you’ll know exactly where you’re going to be when you land. That way you don’t get surprised and trip on your own feet like you just did.” Maddie stood up, positioned herself carefully, then sprang into the air, spun neatly around, and landed in a reasonable impression of a skateboarder’s stance.

“Hey!” Charlie burst into applause. “That was great!”

“You can do that too. It’s pretty easy.”

“Show me how!”

“Okay, come here.” Maddie led him into an open patch of grass, which Eli was thankful for. If he fell, there wouldn’t be scraped knees. “Stand like this.” She demonstrated. “Now, you’re going to push off with this foot, and watch how I wrap my arms when I jump.” She leapt gracefully into the air again. “Pulling my arms in like that helps me turn my body, see?”

“The boarders grab their boards when they spin.”

“They’re jumping off of things, so they have more time in the air than you do. When you’re just jumping up from the ground like this, it’s important to turn fast. Go ahead, try it.”

Charlie tried. He didn’t make it all the way around, but it was a much better attempt, and he stayed on his feet. “Hey!” he cried. “Dad, did you see that?”

“I saw it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Maybe Maddie could be my skateboard teacher.”

“Maybe,” Eli agreed, but that wasn’t what he was thinking. Instead, he was envisioning her as a ballet teacher, a horde of little kids positioned around her as she corrected their technique and helped them to get their spins and twirls just right.

She would be good at it, he realized. She wasn’t just a remarkable dancer. She had a gift for guiding children as well. And on the heels of that realization came another one — he wanted to help her. He wanted to assist her in realizing her dream.

Whether she would let him do that was another question — but he was determined, all of a sudden, to try.

After everything she had already done for him, and for Charlie, it felt as if that was the very least he could do for her in return.

Eli’s resolve to help Maddie open a dance studio was put to the test just hours later as the three of them walked home.

“Come check this out,” Maddie said, turning down an unfamiliar street.

“Home is the other way.” Eli pointed.

“I know,” she said. “But this won’t take long. We’re only two blocks away.”

“Two blocks away from what? I don’t even know this part of town,” he objected.

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll show you when we get there!”

“I want to see.” Charlie took off trotting after Maddie. Eli sighed and followed. He wasn’t fond of surprises. That was how they had ended up at the skate park in the first place, and though it had turned out to be a very good time, he still wasn’t sure about the wisdom of encouraging Charlie to take up such a dangerous sport.

But there was nothing dangerous about walking a few blocks together. This was a nice part of town, very commercial. He caught up with his son and took his hand, and Charlie beamed up at him.

It occurred to Eli to wonder at what age little boys stopped liking it when their fathers took their hands in public. He was pleased and grateful to realize that he hadn’t missed out on those years completely.

Maddie had stopped before what looked like an empty storefront. “Here,” she said in a blissful tone that didn’t match the moment at all, as far as Eli could tell.

He frowned. “What exactly are we looking at?”

“Yeah, what are we looking at?” Charlie chimed in. “It looks like a big empty building.”

“That’s what it is now. That’s what it’s been for about a year. But I’ve had my eye on it. If I had my way, I’d lease it tomorrow.”

“For your dance studio,” Eli realized.

“It’s perfect. The size, the location — I can even imagine how I would remodel it. The barre would go along that wall.” She pointed.

“What’s stopping you from moving forward?”

“Money, of course.” She laughed.

“Have you looked into the cost?”

“I can’t even afford rent on a one-bedroom apartment. No way I could afford this.” She sighed. “It’s a pipe dream, unfortunately. But it’s one I can’t help indulging from time to time. Thanks for swinging by to look at it with me.”

“I like it,” Charlie said loyally, and Maddie smiled at him.

They started for home, and Eli couldn’t help noticing that Maddie didn’t look over her shoulder at the studio — or rather, the space she imagined as a studio — a single time. She had indulged in her daydream, but now she was back to living in reality.

And he tore his eyes from the sway of her hips and the curve of her long neck, knowing that he needed to do the same.

It was fun — no, it was blissful — to imagine what might be with Maddie if nothing stood in their way. But the fact of the matter was that she was his employee. He had a responsibility. The line between the two of them was firm, and Eli knew it could never be crossed.

## CHAPTER 12

ELI

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

Eli pulled the door to Charlie's room shut. "That was fun," he told Maddie. "That whole bedtime routine. Is that what he does every night?"

"Yeah. We get ready for bed, he washes his face and brushes his teeth, and then we each pick out a book for the other one to read aloud." Maddie smiled. "It's what my parents used to do with me when I was a kid. It's nice to get the chance to continue the tradition."

"I like it," Eli said.

"Did you mean what you said about coming home earlier this week?"

Eli nodded. "I meant it when I said I was going to try," he said. "Do you think I made a mistake, saying it in front of Charlie?"

"Well..."

"You do."

"I don't think it's a mistake if you're going to do it," Maddie said. "He's really looking forward to it. You saw the way he lit up." Eli had made the promise after finishing the book he had read to Charlie, and Charlie had become so excited that for a moment Eli had worried the boy wouldn't be able to get to sleep. "If you really are planning on coming home for dinner tomorrow, like you said, then it's nice that he has that to think about. But if there's even a chance that it won't work out, I don't want to see him disappointed."



“I’m going to do it,” Eli said. “Tomorrow, at least, I’m going to make it happen. We’ll have to see from there, but I can do one day.”

“I suppose you managed today,” Maddie said. “I couldn’t quite believe it when you stayed with us all day long. I kept thinking that at some point something was sure to pull you back to work. You surprised me.”

“I just hope it made a difference to Charlie.”

“Oh, it did,” Maddie assured him. “Take it from the person who’s with him every day. He’s not an unhappy kid or anything, but today was the happiest I’ve ever seen him. He loved having the chance to spend time with you. I hope it happens more often. This coming home on time for dinner thing, if it works out — that’s a big step in the right direction.”

“Well, I have you to thank,” Eli said.

The two of them had reached the kitchen, and Eli moved automatically to take out the bottle of wine they hadn’t finished a few nights ago. They had re-stoppered it after a glass each, but now Eli removed the stopper and poured some out for each of them. Maddie had taken her usual place at the kitchen island, and as Eli handed her a glass, it occurred to him that this had become a routine. He never would have believed the two of them would develop a routine together, but obviously they had, and that routine had nothing at all to do with Charlie or his care.

That was a thought best left unexplored. If he pulled too hard at that thread, he would be forced to conclude that he shouldn’t be here with Maddie in the first place — that they were dancing ever closer to that invisible line he had been trying not to cross since the day he had met her.

Oh, but she didn’t make it easy on him! Every little thing she did felt like torture, and

he was half convinced she was doing it on purpose. The way she twirled a strand of hair absently around her finger — surely that couldn't be innocent. She must know that every move she made was captivating.

The air conditioner kicked on, and instantly Eli was aware of her scent on the air, wafting toward him. And though he knew there was no way she was doing that on purpose, he couldn't help the way it made him feel. He wanted to lunge for her.

How long had it been since he had felt this way about a woman?

It wasn't as if there had been no women. He'd had his flings. But between the responsibilities of parenthood and the job, there hadn't been time for anything serious. And now here was a beautiful woman, living in his home, sitting at his kitchen island and drinking his wine in jean shorts and bare feet, as if she belonged here. She did belong here.

And she was smart, and she was funny, and she adored Charlie.

On paper, this was a dream come true.

Eli threw back his glass of wine in a single gulp.

Maddie stared at him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he assured her. "I think I'm going to get up to bed myself, though."

"It's early for you." Was it just his imagination, or did she look disappointed? "I thought you'd be up a little while longer."

"I need to get some sleep," he said. "I've got an early start tomorrow so that I can get home for dinner."

“Oh. Okay.”

He hesitated a moment. “I’ll see you then.”

“See you then,” Maddie agreed

“Dad, we made a pot roast!”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

Eli had been hit by the scent of dinner the moment he walked through the front door of his house, so he wasn't at all surprised by his son's declaration. He allowed Charlie to take him by the hand and lead him back to the dining room, where the table had been set for two.

He looked up at Maddie, who was placing a hot dish on a trivet in the middle of the table. "Only two settings?"

"For the two of you."

"You're not joining us?" Eli thought back over the past week. Maybe she hadn't been given enough time off. He made a mental note to review that with her and see whether a change needed to be made to her working hours — he knew they were long, and he definitely didn't want to lose another nanny the way he had with Katie.

"I thought the two of you would like the chance to eat dinner together," Maddie explained.

"No, sit down with us. If you're only leaving because of that — you put all this work into making dinner. You should get some while it's hot and fresh. And besides, Charlie wants you here — don't you, Charlie?"

"Yeah, I do," Charlie said.

"You guys can tell me all about what you did today," Eli said.

"You seem calm," Maddie observed.

“I do?”

“I mean, more so than usual. Usually you seem a little tense when you get home from work. But today you’re more relaxed. I’m guessing it was a good day?”

“It was,” Eli said. “But, you know, I think what you may be picking up on has more to do with the fact that I was expecting it not to be.”

“Really? Why would you expect that?” Maddie hesitated. “I guess I don’t know very much about what it’s like at your job. Maybe difficult days are the norm?”

“Well, they are — but there’s also the fact that I just took a whole day off,” he explained. “I thought I would be playing catch-up all day long. But as it turned out, my team did a great job keeping up with things while I was away. I didn’t have to worry about it at all. Almost everything I’d have done if I had been in the office yesterday was already accomplished, so there was only a little bit of work to catch up on, and then I was able to get into today’s tasks. It wasn’t anywhere near as bad as I thought it would be.”

“You’re saying the place didn’t burn down without you?”

Eli laughed. “I guess it didn’t,” he agreed. “And I guess that was the thing I always worried about. That if I stayed away from work too long, everything would fall apart in my absence. The fact that that didn’t happen made it easier than I thought it would be to come home early today. I thought that was going to be a real hurdle for me, but actually, walking out of the building at five o’clock felt kind of nice.”

“You should be able to do that,” Maddie encouraged. “It’s your company, after all. It’s not as if you have a boss you need to impress. And I’m guessing that a lot of the day-to-day stuff can be delegated to your employees.”

“You’re right. I think I need to work on trusting them more — but they really proved themselves over the past couple of days, so that’s going to get easier for me now.”

“Does that mean you’ll be coming to dinner more often?” Charlie chimed in. “Because I’m afraid Maddie and I might run out of recipes, Dad.”

“I’m not coming for the recipes,” Eli said. “You know, we do still have Hank. He always cooked for us before. I’m sure he’s enjoyed the downtime while you and Maddie have been doing the cooking, but that isn’t really part of Maddie’s job.”

“Actually, Hank has still been doing plenty of cooking,” Maddie said. “Charlie and I seasoned this roast, but Hank did most of the rest of it while we played in the pool, so we can only take partial credit today.”

“Well, whatever share of the credit you take, you did a great job,” Eli told her. “And I’m glad you two got some playtime in.”

In fact, he wished he could have been there for it. Although opportunities to see Maddie in a swimsuit had been a surprisingly common feature of their lives together since they’d met, it wasn’t the kind of thing he could imagine himself ever willingly passing up. Dinner was all well and good, but another day like the one they had spent on the beach was what he really could have used.

And yet, Eli was mindful of the fact that he couldn’t propose that sort of thing too often. If he did, it would start to be obvious that he was just coming up with excuses to get a glimpse. And he shouldn’t even be hopping on those opportunities with as much enthusiasm as he had so far.

He also couldn’t ignore the fact that he did want to be with her in this setting. Seeing Maddie’s body was great, it was true, but there was something special about these nights, too.

As he watched, she put some roast on Charlie's plate. "Napkin in your lap," she reminded him, and Charlie beamed up at her as he obeyed.

God, what a miracle it was to see him looking up to a woman like that. And how special to see a woman who really seemed to love his son! Those were two things he had never believed he would experience after Fiona had died. Things he'd never believed Charlie would experience.

Sometimes he couldn't believe that his life had taken the turn it had. Sometimes it felt as though Katie walking out on her position as nanny was the luckiest thing that could possibly have happened to the two of them.

But whenever that feeling struck, Eli forced himself to remember that, for Maddie, this was just a job. Nothing more. She might care about Charlie — in fact, Eli was sure that she did. But that didn't mean she was a mother figure, or anything close to it, and he could never allow himself to forget it.

Forgetting that she didn't have feelings for him was foolish, but if he ever let himself think that she might truly love Charlie — beyond the terms of her job — that would be irresponsible, and he would risk letting his son's heart be broken. That was the one thing Eli could never do.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“I’m impressed,” Maddie said softly, three nights later. “You’ve been home early every night this week.”

“It was easier than I thought it would be,” Eli admitted. “It makes me feel bad for not having done it sooner.”

“What matters is that you did it now. Hey, can you hand me that dish towel?”

“I’ve told you that you don’t have to do the washing up. That’s not your job.”

Maddie reached past Eli and plucked the towel from its hook. For a moment, her lean, muscular body was pressed up against his, and he could feel the shape of her curves. It slayed him. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her right where she was, stop her from moving. He knew he couldn’t do that, but there was no denying the desire.

He stepped back quickly instead, breaking the contact between them, which caused her to stumble. He was forced to reach out and put a hand on her arm to steady her, and somehow that was just as intoxicating, although a mere hand on her elbow really shouldn’t have affected him so powerfully. Perhaps it was because he was now imagining all the places he wasn’t touching her.

Maddie cleared her throat, lowered her eyes, and stepped away to start drying the saucepan she had washed.

Eli stood still, half of him wanting to leave the kitchen to be alone with his thoughts — and to break the tension that was so thick in the air he felt as if he could nearly see



it. The other half of him resisted, desperate to stay. Sometimes he felt as if he spent all day waiting for these moments when the two of them would be alone together. Sometimes it felt as if he was living for these moments, and when thoughts like that occurred to him, he was forced to admit to himself that his feelings had already gone much too far to be called back. The most he could hope to do now was to control them, to keep them restrained, like a dog that couldn't be trusted without a leash.

"Will we be seeing you for dinner next week as well?" Maddie asked him.

"I suppose you'd tell me that Charlie has gotten used to that, and it wouldn't be a good idea to disappoint him?"

"I would definitely say that." Maddie hesitated. "I would also be disappointed if you stopped coming home for dinner."

She shot him a glance, as though nervous of what his reaction to that might be.

Eli didn't know how he ought to react. She wanted him at dinner — not for Charlie's sake, but for her own?

"I guess you work hard on those meals," he said at last, knowing it was a poor response, but not knowing what else to say. What could he say?

Maddie seemed somehow deflated by the comment, but she recovered herself. "I do," she said. "And so does Charlie. We both want to see you enjoy them."

"I do. I look forward to them all day." The food was the least of what he looked forward to. Were they both talking in code, circumventing the thing they really meant to say? He couldn't be sure. He was usually so good at reading women — so why did he find her so difficult to interpret?

She cleared her throat. "Dishes are done," she said. "I think I'll go read for a bit before bed." Meaning she would pass on their customary glass of wine tonight.

Eli watched her go, unsure if he was glad of the reprieve or sad to be missing out on more time with her. With Maddie, it seemed, he was always asking himself that question.

## CHAPTER 13

### MADDIE

"I haven't seen you in forever," Tess complained as she set the lunch tray down on the table between the two of them. "That's how it feels, at least. I miss you!"

"I know," Maddie said sympathetically. She reached out to take her soup and sandwich from the tray and arranged them in front of her, consciously aware of the fact that she hadn't said she had missed Tess too.

The truth was that she hadn't, exactly. Not that it wasn't good to see her friend, of course. They were at their favorite cafe today, a few blocks from the beach where Maddie had once worked, and thus, by definition, close to the neighborhood where Eli and Charlie lived. She'd never realized how close this cafe was to those ritzy, upscale houses. Certainly there was nothing blue-blooded about this place, which served sandwiches to order, soup of the day, and soda that you dispensed yourself into a paper cup. Maddie and Tess loved it because the soups were so well made, but not because there was anything fancy about it.

She was glad to be here, but in all actuality, she couldn't say that she had missed these outings with Tess, even though it had been a long time since one had taken place. She had been too distracted with everything that was going on in her own life to feel much longing for this.

She felt guilty about that — but at the same time, surely Tess must understand. She was preoccupied herself, living with her boyfriend for the first time.

“How have things been with Damian?” she asked.

Tess rolled her eyes. “Don’t ask.”

“Uh-oh. Not good?”

“No, it’s fine. I mean, I’m glad he moved in,” Tess said. “It’s just an adjustment. You and I lived together for such a long time that there were never any surprises, but with Damian it’s like something new every day.”

“Good surprises, I hope?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:18 am*

“Well, some of them are. He makes me omelets in the morning, and brigs me coffee in bed on the weekends. You never did that.” Tess grinned. “I mean, it would’ve been a little strange if you had, of course, but it does make for a nice change. So that part is good.”

“I’m glad,” Maddie said. “But you sound like maybe not all of it is good.”

“It just takes some getting used to,” Tess said. “He doesn’t sort his laundry.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“It doesn’t need to be, necessarily,” Tess said. “But like, the other day, for instance, he threw a bunch of my stuff into the washer with his. He said he was trying to help me out, and I’m sure that’s the truth, but it meant all my delicates went through in the same load as his blue jeans.”

“Are they all right?”

“I mean, probably. I might be imagining it, but my bras don’t feel as soft anymore. And you know how expensive they are to replace.”

“I do know.”

“It’s probably not such a big deal for you, living in that big fancy house now.”

Maddie laughed. “Just because I live in Eli’s house doesn’t mean he buys my undergarments,” she said. “I still get paid for the job of being a nanny, and that’s not

exactly a six-figure income.”

“More than you were getting lifeguarding, though?”

“More than that, yes.”

“Well, that’s good, at any rate,” Tess said. “The man should pay you well. You know he’s one of the wealthiest tech tycoons in America, right?”

“Don’t call him a tycoon. He isn’t like that.”

“I’m serious, though. Have you looked him up online at all?”

“No.”

“He’s on all kinds of lists.”

“What do you mean? What kinds of lists?”

“Lists of the most successful businessmen in America. I can’t believe you haven’t looked him up, Maddie. Don’t you want to know everything you can about the person you’re working for? I sure would if it was me.”

“I guess I’m learning about him the old-fashioned way,” Maddie said.

“Well, you can’t be learning much. All the articles I’ve read on the subject seem to say the same thing — he’s a total workaholic. They say he’s constantly in his office. They make it sound like a good thing, that he’s so devoted to his job, but all I could think when I read it was, of course this man needs to have a nanny. He must have no time at all to spend with his son if he spends that much of his time at work.”

“He’s not that bad,” Maddie protested. “And actually, he’s been a lot better lately.”

“What do you mean, he’s been better?”

“He was worse when I first moved in. Staying at the office until all hours. Hardly seeing his son at all. Now, though, he usually makes it home for dinner. It’s a big improvement.”

Tess frowned. “He’s changed his work habits to come home and have dinner with you?”

“Not with me, with Charlie. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Why on earth would it? He wants to see his son. He doesn’t care about spending time with me.”

“Okay, why do you say that as if it disappoints you, though?”

“What? You’re reading into things,” Maddie said. “Or you’re imagining something in my tone that isn’t there. I don’t have any reason to be disappointed that Eli isn’t interested in spending spare time with me.”

“You call him Eli?”

“It’s the twenty-first century. Who doesn’t call their boss by their first name?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s standard for household staff,” Tess admitted. “I guess I thought there would be more...”

“More what?”

“Distance. He comes home to dinner with his son, but you said we. You eat with them?”

“I have to eat somewhere.”

“I mean, do his other employees also eat with you?”

“Well, no.” Now that she thought about it, it would have been odd for the cook or the groundskeeper to join them at the dinner table. And yet, it had become such a habit, such a common thing, for the three of them to dine together. Maddie couldn’t even imagine going back and telling Eli that she would take her meals up to her suite from now on. He would assume that it meant something was wrong. To be honest, he wouldn’t even be wrong to think so. It was nothing she would ever choose on her own, unprompted by anyone else, and of course Eli would realize that. He would think he’d done something to make her want to pull away.

Worse yet, Charlie might think he had done something to make her pull away.

Thinking about it in those terms made Maddie fully realize the seriousness of what she might have done. Of course it would have been a mistake to get too close to Eli — if she had. But the bigger mistake would be crossing professional lines and allowing it to affect Charlie. He had started to trust her and to rely on her presence in his life. Maddie couldn't let anything get in the way of that.

“What are you thinking?” Tess asked.

“I was just thinking about... about dinner tonight.” It was close enough to the truth.

Tess stared. “You're not eating dinner with them tonight, surely?”

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“Maddie, today is your day off, I thought. What are you doing? You're going to go back to work?”

“It's not really work. It's only dinner.”

“And you're telling me that's what you choose to do with your downtime? You get one day off a week and you're going to have dinner with your boss and his kid?”

“It's not like that.”

“No, I'm getting that,” Tess said slowly. “I warned you when you took this job that you needed to be careful. I warned you not to get yourself in too deep with this guy.”

“And I told you that you didn't have anything to worry about,” Maddie protested.

“But you're wrong. You're either lying to me or you're lying to yourself. Anybody can see that you're into him, Maddie. Having dinner with him every night — even on



your night off? Why else would you do something like that? You have feelings for him.”

“Even if I do?—”

“I knew it!”

“I said if, Tess. And what you didn’t let me say was that even if you’re right, it doesn’t matter. It’s not as if he has feelings for me, so what harm could a little crush really do?”

Maddie felt better as soon as she had said the words — but she also felt worse. Better because it meant there was a limit to the damage she could have done with her errant feelings, but worse because it hurt to acknowledge out loud that — whatever it was she was feeling — Eli would never feel it in return. He couldn’t.

She took a deep breath and re-centered herself. “Look, I appreciate you checking in about this, but it’s not something either one of us needs to worry about.”

“I don’t think you should go back and eat dinner with him tonight.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of have to. I promised Charlie,” Maddie said. “You wouldn’t seriously expect me to let down a little kid.”

“Well, no, of course I wouldn’t. I just don’t think you’re being mindful about where all this is heading.”

“I told you — nowhere. Eli has no interest in me like that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Maybe he doesn’t. You would know better than I would about that,” Tess conceded. “But what I do know is that this is headingsomewhere. You’re in your feelings about this guy, Maddie. I’ve seen you get this way about enough men that I recognize the signs. And you can’t let it happen. This one is your boss.”

Maddie sighed, abandoning the pretense. “He’s so attractive.”

“I know. I’ve seen the pictures.”

Maddie had forgotten that Tess had been running internet searches. She vowed later to do some searches of her own and find out what her friend might have seen. But for now, it didn’t much matter. “No picture could do him justice,” she told Tess, thinking of the softness in Eli’s eyes when he spoke about Charlie and the way his whole face seemed to light up in those unguarded moments when they made him laugh. He was attractive when he was serious, but when the facade cracked there was simply nobody like him in the world.

“You should let me meet him,” Tess suggested.

Maddie couldn’t help laughing at that. “You want me to keep my distance from him and also bring my best friend home to meet him?”

“I guess you’re right... that would be difficult to pull off.”

“Tryimpossible.” But even as she said it, Maddie found herself wishing that it wasn’t impossible. It would be wonderful if she was able to combine these two parts of her life somehow — introduce her best friend to the man who had captured so much of

her attention and interest. She and Tess had always talked about their romantic prospects, and it felt odd to have feelings for a man she couldn't introduce to her friend.

But that's for the best. Because nothing is going to come of these feelings. There isn't any reason for him to get to know Tess. She'll never be a part of his life. And as soon as he stops needing a nanny, so will I.

Not for the first time, she found herself wondering when that would be.

She had never intended to nanny for Eli forever. Moving on had always been the plan. But more and more lately, she found herself dreading the day she would have to actually bite the bullet and do it.

She was beginning to fear that it would just be too hard to say goodbye.

## CHAPTER 14

### ELI

As the weeks went by, Eli found it increasingly difficult to get Maddie off his mind.

It began to get in the way of his day-to-day life. He sat in meetings and realized halfway through them that he hadn't been paying attention to what was going on because he had been daydreaming about her instead. More and more, he relied on the notes his assistant took during those meetings, because he couldn't seem to focus on anything.

Instead, his mind wandered to little interactions with her, and he relived them over and over. A time she had ducked her head to laugh at a joke he had told and her hair had fallen across her face. It had felt so good to make her laugh. He analyzed the

joke, picking it apart, trying to isolate exactly what her sense of humor was and how he might make her laugh again, knowing perfectly well that something so calculated would never have the same impact as an off-the-cuff moment had.

He had always been a charismatic person. He was being ridiculous and he knew it. There was no need to plan every interaction like this. Things went well between Maddie and himself when he didn't worry about it and allowed their interactions to come naturally.

But if he was truly honest with himself, that wasn't the reason he spent so much time thinking about her anyway. It wasn't that he was worried about his ability to interact with her. It was just that daydreaming about Maddie felt nice. It had become one of the most potent and enjoyable parts of his day.

Which is fine. Totally fine. There's no harm in daydreaming about an attractive woman. It doesn't mean I would ever act on it.

Of course I wouldn't.

And yet, day by day, the tension grew, and Eli felt an increasing sense that something was going to have to happen. He couldn't act on the feelings of affection that welled up in him every day, but he needed to do something to communicate to Maddie just how valued she was. He needed to let her see that she had changed his life, just by being a part of it.

And over and over, he returned to the same idea of how he could do that.

He took action on her day off. He hired a crew to come to the house and move everything that had been stored in the conservatory up into the attic. He had mirrors fixed to the wall along one side and a sound system installed. He even purchased a ballet barre — a free-standing thing that could be moved about the room. When he

was finished, the space looked nothing like it had when he had started the day — it had been successfully converted into a ballet studio. Eli had to hand it to himself. He hadn't realized he would be able to do this so well, but it really did look great.

Maddie arrived home late in the evening. Eli knew she was in the habit of going out to meet with her friend Tess on her days off, and on this occasion she'd indicated that the pair of them would be going to the movies. He and Charlie waited for her at the door, Charlie bouncing up and down on his toes, nearly overcome with the excitement of it all.

"She's going to love it," he said. "Right, Dad?"

"We hope so," Eli said. He had to admit that he didn't know for sure —the conservatory definitely looked good to him, but it wasn't as if he was any sort of expert on what a ballet studio should be like. Hopefully Maddie would appreciate the effort, if nothing else.

She came in holding a few boxes of movie theater candy. "Hey, you're still up," she said, smiling at Charlie. "I brought you chocolate-covered peanuts. I know they're your favorite."

Eli felt the familiar twinge, a mix of jealousy and guilt, that he always felt when Maddie knew something about Charlie that he himself did not. It wasn't as bad as it had once been, though. He recognized that he knew a lot more about his son than he had even a few weeks ago. What was more, Maddie was responsible for a lot of the new closeness between Eli and Charlie, and Eli was deeply grateful for that. The gratitude he felt served to mitigate his guilt and jealousy a great deal.

And it was a good thing to learn something new about Charlie. He hadn't known his son loved chocolate-covered peanuts — well, now he did know. The fact that he knew it now was more important than the fact that he hadn't known it before. He

filed the information away to be used at a future date. Maybe he would bring Charlie home some candy himself sometime soon.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

Charlie turned to him. “Dad, can I have some candy?”

“Henry and his mom are going to be picking you up for your sleepover night soon, remember? You can have it tomorrow,” Eli said. “I’m sure it will keep just fine.”

“I’ll put it in the cupboard, Charlie,” Maddie said. “Maybe tomorrow we can watch that movie I was telling you about yesterday, the one where the dog gets a job on a sailboat, and we can make our movie snacks. Would that be fun?”

“Ooh, yes. Do you have to work tomorrow, Dad?”

“I do, unfortunately.”

Charlie took that in stride. “Maybe you can watch a movie with us another time.”

“We’ll make sure to set aside an evening for that.” The remarkable thing was that Eli could make a promise like that to his son and know that it was the truth. He could trust in his own ability to carve out time away from work to devote to family. That had never been true before. And in spite of the fact that his burgeoning feelings for Maddie complicated the issue, he knew that he did owe her a debt of gratitude for making that possible. “Do you want to show Maddie our surprise?”

“Oh yeah!” Charlie forgot all about the candy. His eyes lit up with excitement. “Maddie, Dad and I have a surprise for you.”

“Do you?”

“Come upstairs!”

Charlie led the way up to the conservatory, running the whole way. They had to walk quickly to keep up with him. He paused outside the door. “Ready?”

Maddie frowned. “I’ve never even been into this room before.”

“We were using it as storage,” Eli explained. “But now... well, I thought of a better use for it.”

Charlie flung the door open.

Maddie gasped.

Eli could see at once, by the look on her face, that he had gotten it right. The sense of satisfaction he felt was powerful. He hadn’t realized until this very moment how concerned he had been that she would walk into the room and not understand what he had been trying to create — that he would have missed the mark badly enough that she wouldn’t recognize it.

But she did, of course — he shouldn’t have worried. “It’s a ballet studio,” she breathed. “You have a ballet studio?”

“We built it today!” Charlie enthused.

“A team of contractors did,” Eli amended, not wanting to take too much credit. “I hope it suits you.”

“It’s gorgeous.” Maddie turned a slow circle, taking it all in. She walked out into the middle of the room, rose up on one toe, and did a tidy pirouette. “The mirrors — they were there before?”



“I had them installed.”

“Eli, this is too much. You shouldn’t have done all this.”

“It’s not too much at all,” he said. “I wasn’t using this room for anything, and you’re welcome to it. It should be put to some kind of use.”

“But...” she hesitated. “We don’t know how long I’m going to be here. You shouldn’t have invested in a project like this.”

“Do you think you won’t use it?”

“I’ll definitely use it. I’ll use it every day.”

“In that case, it’s worth having,” Eli said. “And if we redecorate again in a few years, that’s no problem — but for now, it will be put to good use. Much better use than this room was being put to, I’d say.”

They were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell ringing.

“That’s Henry,” Charlie said. “They’re here to pick me up for the sleepover.”

“I’ll take you down.” Eli turned to Maddie. “Wait for me here?”

She nodded wordlessly.

Eli took Charlie down to the front door and handed him off to Henry's mother, giving him a quick hug goodbye and promising that he would be home the following day when Charlie returned. The whole time, his thoughts remained upstairs with Maddie.

When he returned to her, she was at the barre, going through a series of exercises. Eli stood in the doorway and watched her for a moment, noting how different it was from the way she'd danced in the living room. She was able to truly focus on her technique now, watching herself in the mirror, checking each of her moves and repeating them if they didn't meet with her satisfaction.

She caught sight of him in the mirror. "This is wonderful," she told him.

"You really like it?"

"I love it — but I can't believe you did it," she said. "It's such an extravagant gift."

"It really isn't as big a deal as you think it is. I wasn't using the space."

"It is a big deal," she countered. "You thought of something I would want, and it's the perfect thing. No one could have come up with a better gift for me, Eli." She left the barre and turned to face him, meeting his gaze. "Thank you," she said earnestly. "This means everything to me."

"I wanted to do something to repay you," he explained.

“Repay me? You don’t have anything to repay me for.”

“Everything you’ve done for me and Charlie.”

“I’ve only done my job.”

“No,” he said. “You’ve done far more than that. I know how challenging it must be to speak up to me the way you have. I have hundreds of people who work for me, and they never seem to manage it. But you did. And I know why you did. It was because you saw that Charlie’s life could be better, and you were willing to take a risk to help my son. I couldn’t ask anything more from anybody.”

“I care about him,” Maddie said quietly.

“I know you do. I’m grateful for that. I can’t tell you...” He trailed off. These were dangerous waters, and yet he wanted to say what was on his mind. Did he dare?

“What can’t you tell me?” she pressed.

He shook his head. “Maybe I should leave you alone.”

“No.”

To his surprise, she stepped closer to him. Her fingertips brushed his. Eli’s whole body felt electrified, and he sensed the precipice they were quickly approaching. If this didn’t stop now, he wouldn’t be able to stop it at all.

He didn’t want to stop it.

“I can’t tell you how much of a difference you’ve made to my life,” he said softly.

“You’ll always be so important to me. It’s because of you that I’ve been able to fix

my relationship with my son. There's nothing on earth that would be too much for me to give to you as thanks for that."

"Eli..." She breathed in, and he was deeply aware of every movement of her body. "This is just the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me."

He curled his fingers around hers without thinking about it, without taking the time to process what he was doing. He couldn't hold back anymore and was tired of trying.

And when he pulled her close, she didn't try to resist.

The moment before he finally kissed her seemed to stretch out forever. Eli had time to wonder whether he was going to go through with it and to question how he had ended up here. He had time to ponder whether this had always been his intention in creating a ballet studio for her.

But he didn't have the strength to stop himself.

The sensation of release the moment their lips met was so powerful that Eli knew he was lost. There was no coming back from it. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, feeling nothing but gratitude that the wall between them had finally come down. Regret might come later, and in some small part of his mind, he was aware of it. But right now, all that mattered was that the two of them were finally together.

She broke the kiss and looked up at him, her eyes full of desire.

"Bedroom?" he whispered, and when she nodded, Eli felt as if an explosion of pleasure had been set off inside his chest. He took her by the hand and led her out of the conservatory without looking back.

CHAPTER 15

ELI

“How do you feel?” Eli whispered.

The sun was beginning to come up. The two of them had been up all night. Eli had believed, at first, that they were only going to satisfy their desire for one another quickly, and that they would move on, like finally scratching an itch after resisting for a long time. But it had turned into a very long night, a night during which neither of them had slept a wink. Eli already knew that he was going to have to reach out to his office and let them know not to expect him in today. Thank goodness he had begun to set the expectation that such a thing would happen from time to time — even a few weeks ago, he knew, he wouldn’t have been able to manage it.

“I feel amazing,” Maddie said. She was lying on her back and staring at the ceiling, where the fan spun in lazy circles. “I can’t believe this happened.”

“I’ve thought about it for a long time,” Eli admitted.

“So have I.”

“Have you really?”

She looked over at him, a small smile on her face. “Did you think this only happened because you made me a ballet studio?” she asked. “I love the studio, but I wouldn’t have gone this far for it.”

“I had no idea you felt the same way I did.”

“I’ve been feeling things for a long time,” Maddie said, looking over at him. “I thought you knew. I thought you must be able to tell.”

“I couldn’t.”

“I hid it better than I thought I did.” She sighed. “I told myself I had to. That nothing could ever happen between us.”

“I know. I’ve been telling myself the same thing.”

“So what changed?”

“I couldn’t hold back anymore. I got tired of trying. I think we must be restraining ourselves for the same reasons, right? Trying to protect Charlie?”

Maddie nodded. “I’d never want to do anything to put his feelings at risk.”

“No. I wouldn’t either. But you’ve been such an undeniable force for good in his life that it’s hard for me to believe anything bad could come of this,” Eli said. “Maybe I’m being too permissive with myself, but... I’m ready to take the risk.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing you say this.” Maddie shook her head. “Tess is never going to believe any of this.”

Eli couldn’t keep a smile off his face. “You’ve talked to Tess about me?”

“We talk about you every time we get together,” she confessed.

“What do you say?”

“Well, she told me that if I had any sense, I would keep away from you,” Maddie

said. “And I told her — over and over — that there was nothing to worry about. That nothing would ever happen between the two of us.”

“I guess Tess saw the situation more clearly than either of us did.”

“She usually does,” Maddie agreed. “When I tell her that this happened, she’s going to be full of I told you so.”

“And then what? Do you think she’ll disapprove?”

“She’ll want to know what happened between us next. How we followed it up in the aftermath.”

“What will you tell her?”

“I don’t know, do I? That part hasn’t happened yet.”

“Well, I’d better work on making the best impression I can.” Eli got out of bed and pulled on his flannel pajama pants.

“Where are you going?” Maddie asked him.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“To get you breakfast. When you tell this story to Tess later, I want to make sure I come off looking really good.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that,” Maddie said. Then she blushed. Imagining what she must be thinking, Eli couldn’t help but laugh — he sort of wanted to ask her exactly what details she would share with Tess, but he decided to leave that between the two of them.

“Just tell me one thing,” he said.

“All right?”

“I just want to know whether you have any regrets. Whether you’re wishing that we hadn’t done it.”

She swallowed. “No,” she said softly. “No regrets at all, Eli. I don’t know where we go from here, and I don’t know if we were wise in what we did, but I do know that I can’t possibly take it back now. It was exactly what I’ve been wanting this whole time, and I’m happy that it happened.”

“Good,” he murmured. “That’s good.”

“Do you feel the same way?”

“We can get into how I feel when I get back with your breakfast.” He flashed her a grin. “Why don’t you just relax? Enjoy the sunrise.”

She nodded and settled back into the pillows.

Eli grabbed his phone from the charger and headed into the kitchen. He started the coffee and then pulled up his email, thinking that he would fire off a quick message to his assistant to let everyone know that he wouldn't be coming in today.

He froze.

There were dozens of unread messages in his inbox.

It didn't make sense. He had cleared it out last night before leaving work. It wasn't yet seven in the morning. What could all these messages possibly be about — unless something had gone seriously wrong overnight?

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he clicked one of them open.

It was from his contact at Harrison Duncan, a law firm that was one of his biggest clients. Eli skimmed the email with mounting horror. Harrison Duncan was canceling all their contracts with his company. The tone of the email was one of deep dissatisfaction bordering on outrage, and Eli had no idea what to think. Everything had been fine yesterday...

He looked at the clock. Was it too early for a phone call?

He knew the answer to that, really, but something had to be done to mitigate this situation. He couldn't just lose such an important client. This was terrible for the business. They would survive the hit, but it was a huge setback.

No, he had to call. He had to at least leave a message, to show that he was taking this seriously.

Jack Harrison answered the phone on the first ring. “It’s about damn time,” he snapped. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you all night, Sinclair.”

“I’m glad I didn’t wake you,” Eli managed, though in truth this was worse. Apparently whatever had happened was so serious that Jack Harrison hadn’t been to sleep yet, and that was worrisome in the extreme. “I just received all your emails.”

“How can you have just received them? Is your company’s technology so terrible that it takes eight hours for an email to go through?”

“What I mean is that I just checked my messages,” Eli said, striving for patience.

“That’s not what was promised when I signed my contract with you. Round-the-clock customer care, that’s what I was told I would receive.”

“I’m sure there have been members of my staff available,” Eli said. “I always have staff on hand to deal with anything that might come up, at all hours. Didn’t anyone respond to you?”

“Of course they did, but I didn’t want to speak to whatever random associate you left manning the desk. When something of this severity happens, I need you, Sinclair. Where were you?”

Eli wasn’t about to be interrogated as to his whereabouts post work hours. “What happened?” he asked. “Whatever it is, I’m sure we’ll be able to set it right.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that. The firm suffered a serious data breach yesterday,” Jack Harrison said. “We’re facing lawsuits from a number of our clients because their data was leaked, and we’re probably going to have to settle with all of them, because they’re completely in the right. I thought your software was supposed to protect against this sort of thing! What went wrong?”

“I have no idea, but I’m more than happy to dispatch a tech support team,” Eli said.  
“We can manage this.”

“It’s too late for that. I’ve been dealing with your tech support staff all night. At least they answer their phones.” Harrison paused. “Do you know why I contracted with your company? You’re not the only security software out there. I had options. I chose your company because of how dedicated you seemed. You told me that you would always be available if I had any issues. Not some minimum-wage desk jockey. You.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

No one in Eli's company was earning minimum wage, but it didn't seem like the time to split hairs. "Tell me what I can do to make this right."

"There's nothing you can do. I've learned my lesson. I'll be taking my business elsewhere. I'm not going to risk putting my firm through this kind of thing again just because you wanted a second chance," Harrison said. "This is over, Sinclair."

"Don't cancel the contract because of one bad experience. Give us the chance to correct it."

"I'm not going to continue this phone call," Harrison said. "There's nothing more to say. If you had been available when the crisis first happened, we might have been able to set things right, but we've been dealing with this for hours. I already have meetings scheduled with two different security software companies to see what they can offer me. You'll be hearing from my legal team about the data breach. Have a good day."

The line went dead.

Eli stood frozen in the kitchen, staring at the phone in his hand. The sound of the coffee dripping into the cup he had set up felt almost hypnotic.

He couldn't believe this was happening. This couldn't be happening.

Except, of course, that it could be. Because it was. And if he was perfectly honest with himself, he should have seen it coming.

What had he thought would happen? That he could go on neglecting work in favor of spending time at home, and that there would be no consequences? Of course it had caught up with him in the end. And how ironic that it had happened on an evening when he hadn't been taking care of Charlie at all. Charlie hadn't even been in the house. There was no good reason he shouldn't have turned his attention back to work. There was no excuse for his having missed those emails.

It was negligence, and now his company was going to pay the price.

The coffee was done, but Eli had no time to sit around and drink it — no time for the blissful morning he had hoped just fifteen minutes ago that he and Maddie might be about to spend together. The thought of it seemed hopelessly naive now. How could he ever have believed that was an acceptable use of his time?

He went back to the bedroom.

Maddie was sitting up in bed. She'd put on a T-shirt, but it was thin and he could make out the shape of her body through the fabric. He forced himself to look away. Looking at her would do him no good.

"I've got to go into the office," he told her.

She frowned. "What about Charlie?"

"You're going to have to handle that. He's going to be dropped off in a couple of hours."

"Eli—"

"It won't be a problem, will it?"

“No, of course it’s not a problem,” she said. “That’s my job. But I thought we were going to have breakfast together. What’s changed?”

“Something came up with a client of mine.” Anex-client, he thought with a bitter pang. It was going to be a big deal, trying to cope with the loss of Harrison Duncan. They had been one of his biggest clients, representing millions of dollars in profit for the company. “We’re going to need all hands on deck.”

“I suppose you’d better go, then,” Maddie agreed, and Eli could tell that she was trying to be accommodating. “Will you be back for dinner tonight?”

“I wouldn’t count on that, no.”

“All right. Don’t worry about it. I’ll make sure everything is taken care of, and I suppose I’ll just... see you late tonight?”

Eli nodded.

It killed him not to be able to offer her anything more than that, especially after the night the two of them had just spent together. She deserved something more. But he had always known that to get too deeply involved here would be a mistake. He’d allowed himself to forget that to his own cost. Until he was able to right the ship professionally, he was going to have to pull way back on the indulging he had been doing in his personal life.

Whatever this thing was with Maddie — whatever potential it might have had — it was just going to have to end now. There was nothing more to be said about it.

He dressed quickly and left the room, his thoughts already returning to Harrison Duncan, trying to figure out if there was anything he could do to save the contract. Jack Harrison had seemed determined to go. If he really was going to lose them, he

would have to think of some way to recoup the losses. The one thing he knew he couldn't do was to allow the people who worked for him to suffer financially because he had taken his eye off the ball.

That was the reason all of this was happening, after all.

If he hadn't let his head be turned by Maddie Foster, everything would still be fine.

## CHAPTER 16



MADDIE

“Is Dad coming home for dinner tonight?” Charlie asked.

He posed the question without much hope in his voice, and Maddie couldn’t fault him for that. It had been a week since Eli had eaten dinner with them — and more to the point, in her mind, almost a week since the night the two of them had slept together. Since then, Eli had been staying at the office late every single night. It was as if he had forgotten everything he’d said to Maddie on the day he’d presented her with the ballet studio — as if he had forgotten the gratitude he supposedly felt toward her for showing him how important it was to be around for Charlie’s childhood.

“I don’t think we’d better wait for him,” she told Charlie. “I think we should go ahead and have our dinner without him.”

“Are you sure? Because if he’s coming, I don’t want him to be sad that we ate without him. I don’t mind waiting.”

Maddie wished she could make a recording of that and play it for Eli. Let him see what his actions were doing.

“I think he would have told us if we could expect him,” she said.

“He doesn’t really come to dinner very much anymore. Maybe he got tired of it.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Maddie said gently, even though in fact she thought Charlie was probably right. “He has a hard job. We know that. I think he just needs to focus

on his work. We should give him the space to do that, and I'm sure he'll come back and eat with us again eventually." He had to do that eventually, didn't he?

"I was hoping we could do another beach day this weekend," Charlie said. "But I guess he's probably going to be working, huh?"

"Yeah, I think he probably will be," Maddie agreed. "You know he does all that for your sake, Charlie, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to think your dad is always at the office because he doesn't like being at home with you. That isn't what it is. He loves being with you. But he wants you to have everything you want in life. He wants to send you to great schools, and he always wants to be able to buy you everything you want. That's why he works so hard — to get the money it takes to give you what you need."

"Maybe," Charlie said.

"You don't think that's right?"

"I think he probably thinks that's right. But what if what I want is to go to the beach with my dad? We can't do that if he's at work all the time. And that doesn't cost money. He could work less and we could still have a good time. If it was about what would make me happy, that is what we would do."

"You should tell him that," Maddie said.

Charlie shook his head. "It wouldn't matter."

The tragic thing was that he was probably right. It wasn't as if Eli didn't realize how

much it meant to Charlie to be able to spend time with him. He knew. Anybody could see it, and Eli was no fool. He had chosen to prioritize something else, that was all.

Charlie probably didn't want to talk to his father about it because he feared the idea of rejection. Maddie couldn't blame him for that either.

The truth was, she was living in fear herself these days. The thing she hadn't yet reckoned with was that this change in Eli's behavior had happened right after they had slept together. In fact, it had happened the moment he had left the bed. He had stepped out of the room for a moment and had come back transformed.

She had believed him, that day, when he had told her that he had a work emergency that had required his presence in the office. But now she was starting to wonder. Had that been the truth, or was it possible that he had been making an excuse to get away from her — that he had found himself regretting what had happened between them as soon as he'd left her side and had needed to get some space?

Maybe that was why he was at work all the time. Maybe it was because of her.

And if that was true, she didn't think she could stand it. The one thing she had wanted in all of this was for her feelings about Eli not to affect Charlie. But if Eli was returning to his old habit of working long hours and ignoring his son — if he was doing that as part of an attempt to avoid Maddie — then she had been a negative force in Charlie's life, and she ought to leave this family alone before she did them any further harm.

It was a terrible thought. She'd come to care so much about both of them. Could leaving really be the thing she had to do to make all this right?

She waited for Eli in the foyer that night, sitting on the bottom step. It was after midnight when he came home.

He startled a little when he saw her. “I didn’t think you’d still be up.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know you stay out all day and night because you’re avoiding me, Eli.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“I’m at work, Maddie. I have a job to do. It isn’t because of you.” He shook his head. “Not everything is about you, you know.”

“Don’t you do that. I’m not making this about me when I shouldn’t,” she said. “I know not everything is about me. But I think this is. And if you tell me I’ve got it wrong, I’ll honestly be more relieved than I can tell you.”

“You’ve got it wrong.” He started past her.

“Don’t walk off.”

“There’s nothing to talk about here.”

“No?” She got to her feet. “Because you were staying at home so much more. You know that, don’t you? You recognize that everything changed — and then changed again?”

He sighed. “It’s late. Do we need to do this right now?”

“When do you want to do it? I’d happily talk to you at a more reasonable hour if you were ever around, but you’re not. I have to take what I can get when I can get it.”

“Fine,” he said. “Say what you have to say, then. I want to shower and get to bed.”

“You’ve been treating me like... like an employee.” She blushed, knowing how foolish she sounded.

“You are my employee,” he said quietly.

“Damn it, Eli — you know what I’m saying. We should be more to each other than that. We are more to each other than that! We’ve become?—”

“What? What did you think we were?”

“Well, friends, certainly.”

“Friends?”

“I know I work for you. I also know we transcended that the first time you poured me a glass of wine. The first time I gave you advice about Charlie and you took it. We’ve been more than employer and employee for a very long time, Eli. And then, a week ago, when Charlie was away — that night...”

“I know what happened.”

“You won’t even look at me. I’m supposed to pretend that isn’t the reason you’re staying away now?”

“It isn’t.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me or don’t. I’m telling you the truth.”

“Eli, I’m not stupid. I know that was the moment everything changed. You were pouring time into Charlie. You were so happy with me that you built me a ballet studio. And then that night happened, and it’s like we’re strangers again.”

“It’s like we’re employer and employee. It always should have been like that. I know you know that every bit as well as I do.”

“But I don’t understand it. What changed? We were so close. You gave me that ballet studio. And the morning after — we were talking about how neither of us regretted what happened, and I swear, you were telling the truth. But then you left, and it’s like you never came back. It’s like we never finished that conversation.”

“We shouldn’t have done what we did.”

Maddie felt as if she’d been punched. “Do you mean that? You were so intent on making sure I had no regrets. Are you telling me that the whole time, you regretted it?”

“It’s not that I regret... being with you.”

“Then what? Make me understand this.”

“Maddie, my company lost millions of dollars that night.”

“What?” It was the last thing in the world she’d expected him to say.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“You knew I had a work emergency that day. You knew there was trouble at the company.”

“I didn’t realize it was that extreme. You said you needed to go into the office. You always say that.”

“You just finished telling me how things have changed, though,” Eli said. “How I stopped prioritizing work. Well, you were right. And my whole company is paying the price now, because I lost a client.”

“Eli, I’m sorry you lost a client,” Maddie said gently. “But that’s something that happens, isn’t it? Even if nothing had ever happened between you and me... sometimes clients end their contracts.”

“You don’t know anything about the business world.”

That was a slap in the face. “You don’t need to be rude. I might not be in that world myself, but I’m not an idiot. I do understand how things work.”

“Then you should understand that clients stay or go depending on the level of service they’re offered. My client ended our contract — costing me and my associates millions of dollars and jeopardizing the business — because he wasn’t happy with the service he was getting.”

“What on earth was he expecting? Service in the middle of the night? You’re allowed to have times when you’re not on the clock, Eli. Everyone is allowed to have that.”



“I should have had an eye on my work. I allowed myself to focus on things I shouldn’t have been paying attention to, and because of it, I lost an extremely important client. I know you had a point about me needing to spend more time with Charlie. I’ll have to figure out how to make that happen without things like this going wrong at work. That doesn’t mean I have time to spare for — anything else.”

“For me.”

“I have people who depend on me. My company relies on me being there. I need to keep my attention where it belongs, Maddie.”

“Don’t you see how backward all this is?” Maddie demanded. “Okay, I get it — you work as hard as you do because you want to provide a good life for yourself and your son. But it’s flipped around now. It’s gone too far in the opposite direction. You’re not working hard so that you can have the life you want. You’re sacrificing the life you want for the sake of your job.”

“This is something you wouldn’t understand,” Eli said firmly. “And I don’t expect you to.”

“You’d be surprised what I can understand. Maybe you should try me.”

“You’re already showing me that you don’t understand. You disagree with the choices I’m making here.”

“Of course I do, but that’s not because I can’t comprehend your reasons for making them, Eli. Do you think I’m an idiot? I know what’s going on.”

“Okay, then tell me.”

“You’re hiding in your work,” she said. “You feel like you have control at work, and

you can't handle it when anything is out of your control, so you're hiding. You're using it as an excuse to pull away — to put up a wall between the two of us, when we just managed to break that wall down.”

“Or maybe you should trust me that I know what I'm doing. I'm sorry things aren't going to work out between you and me, but that just can't be my top priority.”

“You want me to trust you,” she repeated. “Trust you, after everything. Trust you after I finally allowed myself to trust you only to have you pull away from me again.”

“Is that so much to ask? That you put a little faith in the fact that I know what I'm doing, even if it isn't what you hoped I would do.”

“Where has trusting you gotten me so far? For that matter, where has it gotten Charlie? I told you not to get him used to the idea of having you around if it wasn't something you would be able to keep up. He puts a brave face on it, but he's devastated, you know. He doesn't understand why you've stopped coming home early to be with him.”

“Don't bring Charlie into this,” Eli said harshly, clearly infuriated that she would even consider it. “I've put up with a lot in terms of you telling me what to do with my son. But you need to remember that I'm his father. I was his father before you came into our lives and I'll be his father when you're gone. I've listened to your advice, but there was never any agreement or understanding that I would do whatever you told me to do. Not when it comes to my son.”

Maddie shook her head. “You can do whatever you like with me,” she said. “You're right. We should probably never have crossed that line. But for God's sake, treat Charlie with some more kindness. He's your son. He should be your number-one priority in all the world — miles above some stupid client. And I will never stop telling you that he deserves that. If you don't want to hear it, fire me right now.”

Eli stared at her for a long moment, and Maddie wondered whether he really would fire her.

But he turned and walked away, leaving her alone in the foyer.

## CHAPTER 17

### MADDIE

“Can we make eggs for dinner tonight?” Charlie asked.

He was sitting at the kitchen island with a coloring book open in front of him, kicking his feet against the woodwork. Maddie thought about telling him to stop. She hadn’t been feeling well all day — she was nauseous and had a bit of a headache. But Charlie wasn’t doing anything wrong, so she forced herself to put up with the kicking sounds.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“I didn’t know you liked eggs,” she told Charlie.

“Dad likes them.”

“You know he isn’t coming home tonight, right?” They went through this every day, and Maddie hated it.

“I mean, I know he said he wasn’t,” Charlie said. “But in case he does, he likes eggs.”

“He won’t be here, Charlie. We can make eggs if that’s what you want, but he isn’t going to be here.”

Charlie made a sour face. “I know,” he insisted.

Maddie sighed. “All right, I’ll look up some egg recipes. We’ll come up with something cool.” It felt as if the best thing she could do would be to get Charlie excited about the actual meal itself. Maybe then he would forget the daily disappointment of his father not showing up to eat with him.

He wouldn’t, though, of course. This was exactly what she had worried about, and exactly what she’d warned Eli about. It was good for him to change his ways, but only if he could commit to it. As it was, he had given Charlie a glimpse at a different kind of life and then snatched it away. Of course Charlie was moody and unhappy now. He must feel as if his father had abandoned him.

And Maddie needed to swallow down the feeling she had about that — the feeling that Eli had abandoned her— because the last thing she wanted was to make Charlie

feel worse about his father. They were the two that needed to be united. Even though it felt like she and Charlie were on the same side of an injustice, she couldn't let anything come between him and his father. Someday, she would be gone, and Charlie would need whatever could be salvaged of that bond.

He had returned to his coloring, and it was clear that — even though he was disappointed about the idea of Eli not coming home in time to spend time with him tonight — he wasn't devastated. He seemed to be doing his best to take it in stride. To Maddie, that was as sad as anything else — that he could feel that disappointment and then process it so easily. He should expect better of his father, but it was clear that he didn't.

She opened up an egg recipe on her phone, but the pictures made her feel queasy, and she clicked away from it. She was going to have to settle her stomach before the time to start cooking arrived. She went to the fridge and got out a ginger ale. "Want to watch a movie?" she asked Charlie, thinking longingly of the plush recliners and cool, comfortable room that had the big screen TV.

"I thought we could go watch the skateboarders again," Charlie said.

The thought of being out in the hot sun made Maddie's head pound. "Let's stay in today."

Charlie frowned. "I don't want to stay in."

He was usually such an agreeable kid, but Maddie got it, of course — he was acting out because of what Eli was doing. "Just for today," she told him firmly. "We can talk about going to the skate park tomorrow, maybe. It's too hot out to fuss with that sort of thing today."

Charlie sighed. "Fine," he said. "But I get to pick the movie."

“That’s fine.” Maddie didn’t care what they watched. She just wanted to be able to close her eyes and relax for a few hours.

They went into the movie room. Maddie handed Charlie the remote controls and he put on something animated with cats and dogs in it. It turned out to be a musical, and the tunes were pretty, and Maddie was able to spend the next few hours relaxing — but it didn’t seem to help the unpleasant physical symptoms she was experiencing.

“You don’t seem like you’ve been yourself lately,” Eli observed.

He had walked into the movie room late at night, hours after Charlie had gone to bed. To tell the truth, Maddie hadn’t heard him come in. She was watching an old black-and-white film with the volume on low, so she probably should have noticed, but Eli was right — she hadn’t been herself.

Still, she resented him saying so. “What is that supposed to mean?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “I don’t mean anything by it.”

“You don’t know what I’m like,” she said. “Not really. You haven’t known me that long.”

“I only thought... you know, usually you’d spend nights dancing. Are you unhappy with the studio? I can have a change made if it isn’t meeting your expectations.”

“The studio’s great. Do I need to dance every night to show my gratitude?”

“No, of course you don’t. I just wondered if you were all right.” Eli shook his head.

“Obviously, I shouldn’t have asked. Forget I said anything.”

Maddie wanted to say something to him — to let him know that he hadn’t really done

anything wrong. She didn't know if that was a true reflection of the way she felt or not, but she was so tired of the unpleasantness between the two of them that it was tempting to brush everything under the rug and simply allow that to be the truth — force it to be the truth, if that was what had to happen.

She wanted it to be the truth.

It would have been easier, and felt so much better, to forgive him for everything. To allow herself to be empathetic instead of angry about the fact that he had returned to his old habit of pouring all of his attention into work. After all, what he'd said about all the money the company had lost ~~did~~ change things.

She still thought he was making a mistake. She couldn't agree with the way he was prioritizing business over everything else in his life. But at the very least, she could understand what had happened.

The trouble was that it didn't make it any easier to live with.

She was the one who spend every day with Charlie. She was the one watching him long for his father, a longing that was beginning to seem as though it would never be properly satisfied.

And she was left longing for Eli herself. She had truly believed for a moment there that things were about to change between the two of them for good. The night they had spent together had been magical, and the morning after, he had seemed eager to embark on — something. Even when he'd had to go into work, she had assumed it was only a postponement of the conversation they would inevitably have and the plans they would inevitably make for their future. It had to be that, surely.

But he had never come back to her.

Walking into the TV room late at night and acting as if he understood her well enough to worry about her — that was far too little and coming far too late.

She didn't want to talk to him about herself or how she was doing. She certainly wasn't going to tell him she had been feeling unwell. What business was that of his?

Eli had made it clear that he wanted to view her and treat her as an employee — so, fine. That was what they would do. That was what they would be to each other moving forward. And Maddie felt no urge to tell her employer that she hadn't been feeling well for the past few days.

"It's your house," she told him. "I'm your nanny. You can ask me whatever you



want.”

“But I shouldn’t expect an answer?”

“Not if it’s personal. We don’t have a personal relationship,” she said. “I don’t owe you the answers to any personal questions.”

“Okay, got it. I just wanted to see whether you were all right. But I suppose that was nosy of me.”

“I mean, I don’t know why you’re asking about me instead of Charlie,” she said. “If I had just gotten home and hadn’t seen my son all week, my first question would be about him. But people are different, I guess.”

He tensed. “I can get another nanny, if need be,” he said. “If you and I can’t be civil to each other, I don’t think it’s to anybody’s benefit for you to go on working here.”

Maddie lowered her head, though she was still angry and didn’t regret saying what she had. She couldn’t afford to lose this job. Not now. And even though Eli might not see the benefit to Charlie in having her here, she was sure that Charlie needed consistency. And right now, she was the only person providing him with anything like it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, though there was no real regret in it. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Is there anything I need to know about Charlie? Did anything happen today?”

“It was a normal day,” she said. Of course, a normal day consisted of Charlie missing his father terribly, but she had already pushed his limits as far as she dared for one night.

He left the room.

Maddie tried her best to settle back into watching the movie, but she found she couldn't. The interaction weighed on her mind.

He was right that he shouldn't have confronted her. It offended her that he would presume to think he knew anything at all about her, and it disturbed her to think that he might be right.

Because there was truth in something else he'd said — she wasn't herself lately. She would have been dancing on an ordinary night, and the only reason she wasn't doing that was due to the fact that she still wasn't feeling well. Whatever illness had gotten to her and caused her headache and nausea, she still wasn't over it. It came in waves — worse in the morning and late at night, but never fully gone. She didn't feel like dancing because the idea of spinning made her feel sick to her stomach, and she didn't know what could be done about that.

The fact that it didn't seem to be going away on its own, as she had hoped it would, was starting to worry her.

It wasn't until the following morning that the answer came to her, in a rush of shock and disbelief. It was so obvious, once she thought of it, that she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before — and yet it couldn't be the right answer because it simply couldn't be true.

Eli was at work, so there was no choice but to take Charlie to the drugstore with her. Maddie gave him instructions to pick out a few candy bars while she nipped into the neighboring aisle to get what she needed, her heart pounding the entire time. She couldn't quite believe that this was really happening, that it wasn't some sort of strange dream, and she couldn't even begin to process the implications of it. How everything would change for her — for all of them — if her suspicion was correct.

Back at home, she parked Charlie in front of the TV. He didn't even complain or ask to do something else, and she had the feeling that he must have picked up on the tension of the moment. She excused herself to the restroom and took out the pregnancy test she had purchased.

She had chosen the one that developed most rapidly, and the plus sign had already shown up in the window by the time she finished washing her hands.

Still, she stalled there, staring at the test as if time might somehow change the answer she was being given.

I'm pregnant.

It seemed impossible — and yet it made perfect sense of everything. All the symptoms she had been experiencing. Of course this was what it was. What else could it possibly have been?

The reality of the situation was finally starting to settle over her. This pregnancy, if she chose to keep it, would tie her to Eli for the rest of her life. Eli, whose parenting she had little but criticism for, would be the father of her child.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He was not the father she would have chosen, in spite of her feelings for him.

And yet... She thought of the good moments. The way he had panicked the day she'd met him, when he'd thought he had lost Charlie. The way he had taken to Charlie's bedtime routine in order to be a part of the process of putting his son to bed. Maddie couldn't help but love those things about him. If only she believed those were things her child would be able to have...

Eli had made his choice clear, though. When it came to him, work came first. Before family. Before anything. It always would.

And that left Maddie with a terrible question.

What was she going to do about this baby?

And for that matter, what was she going to do about Eli?

## CHAPTER 18

### MADDIE

"I need to speak to you."

Eli looked up from his computer. "Now?"

"Yes, now." Maddie had spent the last twenty minutes trying to summon the courage to come into the office and talk to him. She wasn't about to wait any longer than

necessary.

“I thought you didn’t like talking to me late at night.” He looked pointedly at the clock, which read eleven forty-five.

“And you also know that I would happily talk to you in the middle of the day if you were ever around then, but you’re not. It’s got to be eleven forty-five.”

He let out a sigh.

Maddie felt awful. This wasn’t at all the way she had wanted this to go. “I don’t want us to fight,” she said. “I want to have a conversation with you without it turning into a fight. Can’t we do that?”

“I don’t know if we can. It hasn’t seemed like it lately.”

“Eli, please. I just want to have a conversation with you. Surely we can do that.” They were in for a rough time if they couldn’t, Maddie thought. This was going to be one of the most important conversations of her life. She had imagined it many times before walking in here, and she had envisioned several possible outcomes, but one thing she hadn’t allowed herself to think was that the two of them might spend the whole time sniping at one another. God, wouldn’t that be miserable?

“Sit down,” Eli suggested.

“So we can talk like normal people?”

“Yes, yes.”

She lowered herself into a seat, feeling anxious and uncertain. She wouldn’t have known how to begin a conversation like this one with her most trusted friend, let

alone this man she could barely stand to talk about the weather with.

“What’s on your mind?” Eli asked her.

Maddie swallowed hard. Maybe the best thing to do was simply to jump into it. “I have to tell you something,” she said.

Suddenly, she found she had his attention. He was looking right at her, an expression of concern on his face. “Is this about Charlie?”

“About Charlie? No.”

“You seemed so serious. I just thought it must be about him.”

That made sense, she supposed. “Everything’s fine with Charlie.”

“Then what’s going on? It can’t be that big a deal, if things with Charlie are okay.”

If only that were true.

If only she could simply agree that it wasn’t a very big deal, get up, and walk out of here without any more damage to either one of them.

If only she didn't have to tell him.

But she did. It had been a surprisingly quick decision, once she'd begun to think about it. It would be wrong to keep this from him. If the shoe had been on the other foot — not that a shoe like this ever could be on the other foot, of course, but if it had been — she would consider it the ultimate betrayal if someone was having her baby and didn't bother to tell her about it. It would be far worse than anything he had ever done to her.

And she wanted to give him a chance to do the right thing. She wanted to give him a chance to realize that this baby — this family — needed him to thrive, and that he needed them in order to be his best self.

Maybe she would tell him what had happened and it would change everything. She knew it was a long shot. But if it was even possible...

She took a deep breath and said the words. "I'm pregnant, Eli."

She watched his face as understanding dawned slowly. At first, he didn't seem to quite process what she'd said. He looked confused — his eyebrows pulled together, and he frowned — as if he understood the words, but maybe not the reason she was choosing to tell him about it.

She waited for it to sink in.

His eyes widened, and then she knew that he had it. Her stomach churned. Waiting for his response seemed to take a lifetime.

“Pregnant?” he said at last. “You’re pregnant?”

“I just found out earlier today.”

“How—” He shook his head, dismissing the question he had clearly been about to ask, for which Maddie was grateful — they both knew how it had happened, of course.

He swallowed hard.

He hadn’t asked her if he was the father. She was grateful for that too. In her imaginings, the worst-case scenario had always been that that might be the first thing out of his mouth. She could tell him honestly that she knew he was the father — there were no other candidates — but it felt like such an ugly conversation to need to have. She was glad he had intuited that information.

He drew a deep breath. “All right,” he said.

Now it was Maddie’s turn to try to synthesize the information at her disposal. “All right?” she repeated.

“You’re going to need... what? An expense account, I suppose. To provide for the baby. I’ll set it up. You’ll be fully covered — everything you and the baby need.”

“That’s what you have to say? You’re going to start a bank account?”

Maddie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It wasn’t the worst thing she had imagined — it was somehow even worse than that. He was throwing money at the problem? He was treating her as if she was one of his clients, as if she had some kind of business complaint.

The future was suddenly abundantly clear to Maddie — this was probably the last



conversation the two of them would ever have about this child. If they spoke again, it would only be about the finances. She would reach out to him when she needed money for a doctor's appointment, for school supplies or a college fund. She saw it all as if she had already lived it, and she could hardly believe she had dared to hope for anything better. Of course this was the man he was. He had never tried to hide his character from her. He had never suggested that he might be anyone else.

She got to her feet.

He watched her. "You're going?"

"You're going to start a bank account," she repeated. Was there more to say? "I suppose you'll let me know when that's done so that I can start using it."

He looked a little taken aback, possibly by her quick acceptance of the situation. "I'll make sure you get a bank card and all the account information, yes," he said.

"Great. Perfect. Then I don't think we have anything else to talk about here."

Eli had the decency to look a little uncomfortable. "Maddie, maybe we should discuss this."

For a moment she was tempted to sit back down, to give him a second chance — but she resisted the temptation. It wouldn't change anything. He would tell her again that he intended to provide for her — he would try to frame it in a way that made him feel as if he was doing the right thing. He wanted to keep talking for the sake of his own guilt about the situation, but that wasn't Maddie's job, and she didn't think she could stand to continue this conversation for another moment.

No one had ever broken her heart quite like this.

If Eli didn't want to be with her, that was fine. She could accept that. But how could the man reject his own child?

She wanted nothing more to do with him.

"I think it's best if I leave," she said.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“All right,” he agreed. “We can talk later.”

“No,” Maddie said. “I mean, I think it’s best if I leave this house altogether. Stop working for you. This hasn’t been a good situation for either one of us for a while now, and for me to carry this pregnancy in front of Charlie... that’s not a good idea. I should go now.”

She held her breath, wondering how Eli would respond. Surely he would try to convince her to stay?

But he didn’t. He returned his eyes to the computer screen. “If that’s what you think is best,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion.

The shock of realizing how little he cared, in the end, rocked Maddie to her core. She was stunned and frustrated, too, to realize that she cared deeply for him. It would hurt her badly to leave.

But it was what needed to be done.

“I just can’t thank you enough for this,” Maddie said, settling on the bed that had once been hers.

Tess sat down beside her and handed her a cup of tea. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like,” she said gently.

“I appreciate you not saying ‘I told you so.’”

“Well, even I couldn’t have predicted this.” Tess put an arm around Maddie’s shoulders. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, all kinds of ways.” Maddie sighed. “I wish it was simple. I wish I could just be angry with him and resent everything that happened between us, but I can’t. The truth is that a lot of it makes me really happy.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to have a baby.”

“Neither can I. I’m being completely irresponsible by going ahead with this. I don’t even have a place to live!”

“But you will,” Tess assured her. “Once that bank account is ready to go, you’ll be able to find a perfect home for yourself and the baby. Not that I want you to rush into moving out. You should make sure the place you choose is exactly what you want. We’ll help you look — me and Damian.”

“Thank you, Tess. I can’t tell you how much that means to me. I don’t know what I would do without the support of friends at a time like this.”

“You’re not going to have to find out. We’ve got your back. You’ll let me throw you a baby shower, won’t you?”

“Oh, God. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I just feel like people might think this isn’t something to celebrate. Accidentally getting knocked up by my boss.”

“Maddie, you’re going to be a mother,” Tess said. “You’re taking the biggest step

forward in life that I can possibly imagine. And I know it isn't happening in the most conventional way, and I understand that you have doubts about it because of that, but everyone is going to want to be by your side. All of our friends are going to be as excited as I am to support you in this. Trust me."

"I trust you." Maddie smiled. "And you're right. This is a big deal, isn't it?"

"You're having trouble feeling how special it is right now because of how that jackass reacted when you told him, that's all."

"He's not a jackass."

"Of course he is! What kind of man hears that he's going to have a baby and says okay, I'll set you up a bank account? What would you think if you heard that Damian had done that to me?"

"Damian would never."

"No, exactly, he wouldn't. And the fact that Eli would tell me everything I need to know about him. He's selfish and heartless and frankly not the kind of man anyone would want to raise a child with."

"I know you've never liked him, based on those articles you read about him."

"I would have let him prove me wrong if he had handled this situation well," Tess said. "But he didn't. And you just don't get unlimited chances when it comes to my best friend. We don't need him. We can do this without him. You can do this without him."

Maddie nodded sadly. "You're right," she said. "And it's probably for the best. At the end of the day, I don't know that I can trust him as a father. Not after seeing the way

he was with Charlie. He broke that poor boy's heart, and I'd never want that to happen to my kid. I can hardly stand the idea that I left Charlie to that."

"It was the right thing. Like you said before, you couldn't live in that house, have a baby that's technically going to be Charlie's sibling, and keep their relationship a secret. Charlie might be just a little kid now, but if he ever figures out what happened..."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“It would destroy his relationship with his father.”

“It was the kindest thing you could do for him to leave that house when you did, even though it might be hard on him in the short term.”

“You’re right,” Maddie agreed. “It’s just that I care about him. It’s tough to leave him behind. All of this is very hard.”

“You’re making all the right choices,” Tess reassured her. “I know it’s hard to have faith in that, but you are. And I’ll be beside you the whole way. You’re not going to be alone.”

“Thank you, Tess,” Maddie said. “You’re a true friend.”

“Make yourself at home,” Tess told her. “I want you to stay here until you have a plan that makes you happy for the future. And until that day comes, I’ll be right with you every step of the way.”

Maddie nodded gratefully. She knew she was lucky to have people supporting her. Some expectant mothers didn’t even have that.

But she knew that she would never stop wishing Eli had been the one to stand up and do the right thing for her and for her baby.

Her child would never have a father. She would be the best mother she knew how to be, of course, and she had faith that she would do well, but even so...

She thought of the relationship she'd shared with her own father when he was alive — of all he had meant to her.

It broke her heart that her baby wasn't going to have that.

But Eli Sinclair simply wasn't that kind of man. He never had been, and she should never have expected him to be.

## CHAPTER 19

### ELI

Work had always had the ability to occupy Eli's thoughts and to help him calm himself. But ever since Maddie's revelation and subsequent departure, it hadn't had the same effect on him.

He still couldn't believe that she was gone. It seemed beyond belief that she had left so quickly — didn't she care about Charlie? Hadn't she thought about the situation this would put them in? She should have stayed, he thought irritably. She should have hung around until he had hired someone else. That would have been the very least she could do.

"When are we getting a new nanny?" Charlie asked.

He sounded exhausted and frustrated, which was just how Eli felt. Eli had been working from home since Maddie's departure, and Charlie had been forced to spend his days in the house, largely in front of the television. It was for his own safety, of course, but Eli also knew his son longed to go swimming or skateboard shopping, and there was a part of him that wanted to indulge those things.

The problem was that every time he stepped away from work, he was overwhelmed



by thoughts of Maddie. And every time he thought of her, he was forced to acknowledge to himself that he had treated her terribly.

He couldn't think about it without feeling overwhelmed by shame. Maddie was pregnant — she was having his child. She had come to him to tell him about it, and he had handled it in what had to be the worst way imaginable. No wonder she had left! How could he have done that?

And yet... could he have done anything else? Eli knew that he was not a good father. He hated the knowledge, but it had been Maddie herself who'd made that clear to him. He wasn't what his own son needed. If Fiona had still been alive, he might have been tempted to withdraw a bit from Charlie's life — as much as it would have broken his heart to do it — because he knew his inability to be a good father was making his son's life worse.

This baby — and Maddie — had a chance for a life that wasn't tarnished by his presence, and they deserved that. He wasn't going to get in the way.

Maddie had no doubt been hoping for more from him. But what Maddie wanted was to see him transform into someone new. He'd heard what she had said the day they had fought about how much time he spent at work. She believed that his priorities were out of order. She wanted to see him choose family over work. She didn't understand how bound up together those two things were, how the only reason he worked as hard as he did was to ensure that his son would have a good life. She didn't know what it was to be hungry and not to know where your next meal was coming from.

At the end of the day, the most important thing he could provide for any child was financial security, and he was giving that to Charlie and to this new baby. Nothing else could possibly matter as much as that. In time, Maddie would come to see that, and she would be grateful to have it without having to attach herself to him

personally.

Maybe she would marry someone else, and the kid would have a good father — a father who could actually be involved.

Eli was surprised by how much that idea pained him.

“Dad?” Charlie said.

“Hmm?”

“I asked when we’re getting a new nanny.”

“I don’t know, Charlie. As soon as we can, I guess.”

“I don’t really want one.”

“You’re too young to be on your own all day,” Eli told him.

“I know, but I want you to be with me. Not a nanny.”

Eli sighed. “Charlie, you know I can’t do that. You know I have to work.”

“You’re the boss, aren’t you? At your job?”

“Yes.”

“So why can’t you make it so that you don’t have to work?”

“That’s not the way it works,” Eli told him. “My job is important. If I don’t go to work, a lot of people might find themselves without jobs, and that’s not a good thing. I have to make sure I’m there for them, to help them.”

“But...” Charlie frowned. “Dad, I know your job is important, but you have a lot of people who work for you, like you said. Can’t anybody else do your job?”

“Well...” It was a fair enough point, of course. There were plenty of people capable of doing what Eli did on a day-to-day basis. “They can,” he said eventually. “But if I’m there, I can make sure everything is done perfectly.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “It’s just... other people can do your job, but you’re the only person who can be my dad.”

The words rocked Eli to his core.

Charlie was utterly correct, of course.

It was the same thing Maddie had tried to explain to him over and over. By choosing work, he was choosing not to prioritize Charlie, and Charlie was his only son. Charlie should be the most important thing. He went to work to provide for Charlie, but both Charlie and Maddie were right — his constant presence was not required in order for the business to run.

He didn't want anything to go wrong at work. That was why he was so determined to be present all the time. But while he was making sure things were running smoothly at the office, things could easily go wrong at home.

And with a pang of horror, he realized that things had gone just about as wrong as they could go.

Maddie was pregnant — with his child, with Charlie's sibling — and he had let her get away. Worse — he had driven her away with his actions. He couldn't even blame her for having left. Of course she had.

He was the only person who could be Charlie's dad, but he was the only person who could be that baby's father, too. He was so devoted to his work that he was letting his family slip through his fingers, and there would be no correcting these mistakes.

He closed his eyes. How was he going to hire a new nanny after what had happened? How could he ever bring himself to do that?

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Charlie."

“I think we should get Maddie back.”

Eli opened his eyes. “Is that what you think?”

“It was good having her here,” Charlie said. “I really liked her. I don’t know why she left. Did she move in with her boyfriend, like Katie did?”

“No, she didn’t. She’s living with her best friend Tess, remember. She told us when she left that that was where she would be.”

“Oh yeah,” Charlie said. “But then that means she can come back. She doesn’t need to live with that Tess person. They’re not going to get married or anything.”

“No.” Eli had to smile. “They’re not.”

“So get her to come back.”

“I don’t know, Charlie,” Eli said. “She decided that she was ready to go. We might need to respect that. It might be that she doesn’t want to work here anymore, and if that’s her choice, you and I need to respect it and move on.”

Charlie was quiet for a moment. “Because she wants to be a dance teacher?”

“Maybe that’s part of it.”

“But then... why can’t she come back and live with us and just not work for us?” Charlie asked. “She doesn’t have to be my nanny. She can just be our friend who lives here. And then she could be a dance teacher, and we could all still be together.”

“That’s what you’d want if you could have your way about it?”

“Of course,” Charlie said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know, to be perfectly honest with you. And I don’t know if she would either.”

“I think we should ask her,” Charlie said. “We can ask her, right? We shouldn’t have let her move out, Dad. She was special.”

She had been special. Eli was in full agreement with his son about that.

But what could he do? After the way he had responded to the pregnancy news, how could he call Maddie and ask her to come back? Of course she wouldn’t want to. She probably didn’t want to see him ever again, and if he was honest, he couldn’t blame her for that. Looking at it objectively, the way he had treated her was appalling.

Charlie turned his attention back to the handheld video game he was playing, signaling that — for now, at least — he was finished with the conversation.

Talking to his son shouldn't be this difficult, Eli thought. And the fact that it was — that was just further evidence to add to the pile telling him that Maddie was right. She always had been.

He had focused too much on work and had let his relationship with his son pay the price.

And now he was allowing his relationship with his unborn child to be taken from him too — all because he didn't trust his own ability to be a good father.

It couldn't be more clear that something had to change. He had to find a way to turn this around, to become the father that Charlie — and Maddie and her baby — deserved. It was the most important thing he would ever do with his life, and he was messing it up.

What if he hadn't had Charlie here to point this out, to tell him how important it was to bring Maddie back to the house? Would he ever have made that discovery on his own, or would he have gone the rest of his life believing that sending her away had been the right choice?

That was a terrifying thought.

All he could do now was hope that it wasn't too late — that he hadn't blown his chance to have Maddie and the baby in his life. He would do whatever he could to bring them back. It had taken losing them to make him realize how much he needed them, and it wasn't a mistake he was going to make twice.

It would take a lot, though, to win her back after the mistakes he had made. He didn't know if he could do it.

What he did know was that he didn't want to promise his son more than he would be

able to deliver. He didn't want to raise Charlie's hopes too high. That was one of the things Maddie had cautioned him about, and he knew he needed to take it seriously.

"Maddie was special," he agreed. "But we always knew she might be with us for only a short time, Charlie, didn't we? We always knew that she might move on, and that we needed to be ready for that. That's what happens with nannies. They stay for a while, and then they have to go — just like Katie."

"No," Charlie said firmly. "Maddie wasn't like Katie, Dad."

"Tell me why."

"Because she really loved us," Charlie said. "Katie just worked here, but Maddie was my friend. If you ask her to come back, she will. I know she will."

Eli sighed. The trouble was that his son was right — and yet he had no way of knowing whether Maddie really would return.

"I won't hire another nanny," he told Charlie. "Not right now, anyway. Maybe we can get by on our own."

"You mean you'll work less?"

"I'll try. But you and I are going to have to work together on this, understand? I still do have to work. If I can work from home, I will. But it's not going to be like it was when you had a nanny — trips to the ice cream shop and the skate park and the beach whenever you're not at school. I need you to understand that. If what's most important is having that kind of fun as much as possible, then we should hire a nanny."

"No," Charlie said at once. "I don't need to do that stuff. I can wait until Maddie



comes back.”

Did he understand that Maddie coming back was a long shot? Eli couldn't be sure. But he had done his best to explain it. Now the priority had to be very simply trying to get her back.

She would come, wouldn't she?

She wanted what was best for her baby. She would have to come back. She must want her baby's father involved.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

And yet — she perceived him as a bad father, and she probably wasn't even wrong about that.

Was there even a hope that he could convince her?

Eli rubbed his hands across his face.

He had allowed his family to fall apart.

He would do whatever it took to put it back together.

## CHAPTER 20

### MADDIE

“Oh, hell,” Maddie murmured.

Tess looked up from her breakfast. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“Kind of. I have a text from Eli.”

“Oh, whoa. What does he want?” Tess leaned over as if intending to read the text right off of Maddie’s phone, and Maddie found herself reminded of how few boundaries her friend had had when they’d lived together. It was something she had adjusted to living without since she’d been at Eli’s — there had been more privacy there. It was good to be back in the familiar space she had shared with her best friend for so long, but she also missed having privacy.

She would have it again when she moved out.

But moving out would mean allowing herself to begin depending on Eli's money. That was something that was going to have to happen eventually, of course, but Maddie found herself trying to put it off. It felt like she would be accepting his dismissal of her, and she didn't want to do that. If she'd had her way — if there was any practical way to do it — she would have refused his money. But it would have been foolish and irresponsible to do that, given that there was a baby to care for. Maddie didn't even have a job. She needed all the help she could get, even if taking it made her feel terrible.

"He wants us to meet for lunch," Maddie said, reading the text. "Later today. He has a restaurant in mind, and he wants me to come and meet him there."

"What for?"

"I'm guessing he has the account set up for me," Maddie said. "He told me he would be in touch about it. He probably wants to give me the documents, or maybe he needs me to sign something."

"That's a little quick, isn't it?"

"Oh, not particularly. Knowing him, he wanted to do it all as hastily as possible," Maddie said dryly. "Eli cares a lot about things like efficiency and making sure his business is handled. I'm sure he got to work on this the moment I was out of his house. He'd never drag his feet about something like this. It's only when it comes to taking care of members of his family that he isn't very responsible."

"Well, great," Tess said encouragingly. "You'll have the account. That's a good thing, right?"

“I don’t know. I guess it is.” Maddie had mixed feelings about it, for reasons she struggled to fully understand.

“Once you’ve got it, you and I can go shopping,” Tess said eagerly. “We can visit the high-end mall. Go to all the stores we can’t afford to so much as set foot inside most of the time. It’ll be great.”

Maddie laughed. “This account isn’t for us to buy ourselves things,” she told her friend. “We shouldn’t take advantage.”

“I don’t see why not! He should be providing for all of your needs, shouldn’t he?”

“He’s taking care of the baby, not me,” Maddie said. “That was the agreement.”

“The agreement was that he was going to give you an account to use as you saw fit. I don’t see any moral issue with using it for a little retail therapy, especially given the mental and emotional pain and suffering he’s caused you. To me, that seems pretty fitting.”

“Well, it doesn’t feel right to me. And I don’t want him buying me things, anyway,” Maddie added. “I don’t want anything he might have to give me. He can take care of the baby — he should be doing that. But if I bought myself stuff using his account, it would feel like accepting gifts from him. I’ll use this money for the baby, but I am not taking a single dime that I don’t absolutely need to take. I’m doing as much as I can on my own, without any help from him.”

“You and I are very different sometimes,” Tess said. “But fine. If he has the account ready, we’ll go buy a bunch of baby things. We can do that, right?”

“Okay, okay,” Maddie agreed. “That would be all right.” She smiled. “That might be kind of fun, actually. A bunch of cute baby clothes might be just the thing to put me

in a better mood.”

“I knew I would convince you. I’ll start making a shopping list while you go and meet with him.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I actually want to meet with him,” Maddie said.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Why not? Don’t you want to get the account?”

“Yeah, but can’t I get it over text? I’m sure he can text me the information.”

“You want him to send you bank information by text? Come on, Maddie, you know that’s not a good idea. That actually sounds like something I might come up with, and then you would tell me how stupid I was being.”

“I wouldn’t call you stupid.”

“You know what I mean, though. It makes sense that he wants to meet with you,” Tess said. “It’s probably about being safe with the information. And it’s like you said — he might need you to sign some documents, too.”

“Hmm. Should I have a lawyer look them over first?”

“Do you think that’s necessary? I mean, ordinarily I would say yes, but he’s a CEO. He probably has lawyers on staff who looked at the papers.”

“And you don’t think I need my own lawyer?”

“If you want, but I don’t think he’s trying to deceive you here. Even I don’t believe that. If you get there and he has papers for you, if you’re not comfortable with what you’re looking at, tell him you want them looked at before you’ll sign. That shouldn’t be such a big deal to him.”

“You’re right,” Maddie agreed.

“And in the meantime, go to this meeting. Maybe none of this lawyer business will even feel necessary to you once you get there. The sooner you can get access to this money, the better, right?”

“I don’t know,” Maddie said. “I mean, I know I should.”

“Come on, Maddie. Not wanting him to provide anything for you personally is one thing, but he should be taking care of your baby. That’s only right, and you know it.”

Maddie sighed. “I want to do it without his help,” she said. “I know I should get over that.”

“You should absolutely get over that. You can’t let your pride get in the way of doing the right thing for your baby.”

“But do I really need to meet with him? Surely he could just email me the account details, even if he doesn’t think texting is secure. Email ought to be safe enough.”

“I’m not going to pretend that I know what he’s thinking,” Tess said. “But if he wants to meet with you, you might have to do that. You might have to do this on his terms.”

“I can’t stand the idea of him setting terms.”

“Yeah, I bet not. But all you really need to do is get through this lunch, right? Then you’ll have the money he promised you, and you’ll be ready to start getting ready for your baby. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but actually, the sooner you get this sorted out with him, the sooner you can get him out of your life for good. And that will definitely be an improvement, right?”

Maddie was quiet.

“Oh,” Tess said, her eyebrows lifting. “Oh, I get it.”

“What do you get?”

“You know that this meeting will be the one where you cut ties with him — and you don’t want that to happen,” Tess said. “That’s why you’re hesitating. It isn’t because you don’t want to accept his money — at least, it isn’t only that. You also want to put this off as long as possible because you know that once the money is settled, there will be no reason for the two of you to see each other again.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Maddie protested.

“You might not have been thinking it, but it is the truth,” Tess said. “I know you pretty well, Maddie, and I know how you act when you’re afraid.”

“Afraid? Okay, I’m definitely not afraid of him.”

“Not of him. Afraid that this is the last time you two will see each other. You’re afraid of the way you feel about him. I think you’ve been afraid of that from the very start. You know that you stand to get hurt here.” Tess reached out and put her hand on top of Maddie’s. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I don’t know,” Maddie admitted softly. “I hate to think so. I don’t want you to be.”

“Sure. I get it. It would be much easier if you could walk away from all this without having to feel anything. It would be easier if he didn’t matter to you, right? But you wouldn’t be in this situation if you didn’t have feelings for him, Maddie. You wouldn’t have slept with your boss if there weren’t feelings there. You’re too smart to do something like that for no reason. I know how hard you tried to avoid it. You tried to keep it from happening. The fact that you weren’t able to do that means you have feelings for him that were too big and too powerful for you to ignore.”



“Even if that’s true... it doesn’t matter, Tess. Eli doesn’t feel anything for me. If he did, he couldn’t have treated me like he did. I mean, there’s no way I could have treated him like that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“I know,” Tess said. “And I think there’s a part of you that’s holding out hope that he’ll realize how wrong he was and try to set things right.”

“Is that crazy of me?”

“It’s not crazy to want it,” Tess said gently. “But what you can’t do is let yourself keep hoping that it’s going to happen. You need to meet with him, get your affairs in order, and move on with your life. You owe yourself that, Maddie. You can’t live in limbo, waiting for him to realize he made a mistake. You’ve got to allow yourself to move on.”

Maddie sighed. “You’re right,” she said. “But it’s still hard to actually do it. You’re exactly right about what I’m thinking about it, and I didn’t realize it until you said it. I feel like, once we do this, it will cut all the ties between us. I feel like the baby should be this powerful bond, but it isn’t, and so the only thing I have left that connects me to him is the fact that he’s promised me this account.”

“That makes sense,” Tess said encouragingly.

“It’s pathetic, though,” Maddie said. “It’s like breaking up with a boyfriend and not giving him the chance to return your things because once that’s done, there will be no more reason for the two of you to see each other. I’m refusing to let this end because I can’t stand for it to be over, and that’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Tess said. “You felt something for him. You still feel something for him.”

“He doesn’t feel anything for me.”

“Then he’s the one who ought to be embarrassed, not you. He’s the one who didn’t realize how good he could have had it. He’s the one who let you and that baby walk out of his life without a second look, and he’s the one who is going to have to live with that mistake forever. Think about it, Maddie. Ten years from now, you’ll know that you did everything you could. You told him about your pregnancy. You invited him to be involved. He could have been a part of this. But when he thinks back in ten years, all he’s going to be able to think about is the fact that he blew it.”

“I don’t know if I would feel better or worse about it all if I thought he was going to care about that,” Maddie said.

“Oh, he’s going to care, all right. Don’t forget, he has another child. He’ll never be able to stop thinking about this. When his kid graduates from college, gets married, achieves any milestone in life, Eli Sinclair will be stuck wondering about the child he doesn’t know. And he will never know what happened with this one. It’ll haunt him until the day he dies,” Tess assured her. “I don’t know whether that makes you feel better or worse either, and I’m not going to try to tell you what you should feel about it. But I’m confident that it’s the truth. He will always wonder, and he will never know.”

Maddie swallowed hard. Her friend was almost certainly right. Somehow, it made her feel better and worse at the same time. She wouldn’t have thought that was possible, and yet here they were.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll go and meet with him. We’ll get this settled once and for all.”

She was sure it would be the last time she ever saw Eli Sinclair.

## CHAPTER 21

### MADDIE

Maddie's heart raced as the ride share pulled up in front of the address Eli had given her.

She had never noticed this cafe before, oddly enough. She had certainly been in this part of town plenty of times. In fact, she noticed, the property she had always had her eye on for a dance studio was just across the street. She wondered whether Eli had considered that when he had chosen this place for their meeting — whether it had occurred to him to think about the significance it had to her.

It probably hadn't, she decided. He had proven so many times that he simply wasn't thinking about things like that. He didn't consider other people's feelings. He would have chosen this location for some practical reason. It was probably the most convenient to him, nothing more.

Still, she couldn't get the idea out of her head — the thought of him standing on the street and looking at the empty space she dreamed of owning. If he had done that, it would mean that he had — in some sense — envisioned her future. And there was no way for him to do that without thinking about their child.

She wanted him to think about the baby, she realized. What Tess had said was right. Eli would probably always have to think about the fact that he had another child out there somewhere, a child he would never even know. That thought would be nothing but a source of unending questions for him.

Maddie wanted him to live with those questions. He shouldn't be able to simply shake this off as if nothing had happened. He should have to feel something about it for the rest of his life.

She went into the cafe and took a seat by a window, not bothering to glance around to see whether he was already here. She was determined not to search for him. Let him come and find her.

And a moment later, he did exactly that. She saw the shadow he cast over her table and knew that it was him, and she had to restrain herself from looking up at once.

“Maddie,” he said quietly.

Now she did look up, slowly, careful to compose her face and not betray all the things she was feeling. The anxiety at facing him again, the grief at knowing that it would be the last time, the anger at the fact that he had somehow made her feel all these things in the first place. She couldn’t let him see any of that.

Still, when her eyes met his, it was like a punch in the stomach. All she could think about, all of a sudden, was the way it had felt to lie in his arms and have his hands moving all over her.

She couldn’t wish away that moment. She couldn’t wish away her baby. No matter how much it all plagued her now, she was still glad it had happened, and she held onto that fact. She would always be glad it had happened, even if it hurt.

“Can I sit down?” Eli asked.

She gestured to the chair, indicating that he might as well.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

He sank into it and glanced out the window. Maddie knew he was looking out and seeing the space she had longed to make her dance studio, though whether he was registering it as such was a different question.

“I’m guessing you have something for me to sign?” she said. It wasn’t that she was in a hurry for this meeting to come to an end, exactly, but she did want to feel as if she was in control of it, and sitting here waiting for him to speak first would have put the power in his hands.

He looked back at her, confusion etched on his face. “Something to sign?”

“Some sort of paperwork, I’d thought,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“This is about the bank account you set up for me, isn’t it?” She felt a sudden spark of embarrassment. Maybe it wasn’t about that. Maybe she was coming across as rude or entitled for asking about that.

But shouldn’t she ask about it? It was no more than what he had offered her in the first place, after all, and besides, he should take care of his child. That wasn’t asking some unreasonable amount. No, this was just an awkward conversation, that was all. It made sense for her to feel awkward about it, but she couldn’t let that awkwardness keep her from doing what had to be done.

Eli shook his head. “I didn’t come to talk about money,” he said.

“Well, I think we should talk about it,” Maddie said determinedly. “If the arrangements haven’t been made yet, I suppose that’s all right, but I’m going to have doctor appointments soon, so this isn’t something that can wait forever.”

“I’m sorry,” Eli said. “It’s not my intention to make you wait. It’s just that there’s something else you and I need to talk about.”

Maddie frowned. “What else could we have to talk about? We don’t have anything else between us. Not anymore.”

He ran a hand through his hair. Maddie’s heart ached, remembering what it felt like to run her own hands through his hair. She steeled herself. This would be over soon enough, and she would be able to give in to all the feelings she was experiencing about it, but she wouldn’t let herself break down in front of him.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about,” he said. “The way things ended between us. I don’t like it.”

“What were you hoping for?”

He hesitated. “Charlie really misses you.”

It was the one thing he could have said to make her doubt herself. “I miss him too,” she admitted. “But it’s for the best that we ended things when we did. I couldn’t exactly stay in your house. I’m having this baby, Eli. Charlie’s a smart kid. He would start to ask questions, and what on earth would we tell him? I don’t know if he even knows where babies come from.”

“He does. He’s inquisitive. I had to tell him the truth about a year ago.”

“Okay, then he’d understand that a baby means a father,” Maddie said. “He’d want to

know who. What could I tell him about that? The truth? A lie? There's no good answer. You don't want to be a part of this child's life, and that means I can't be a part of yours or Charlie's."

"This isn't going at all the way I meant it to," Eli murmured.

"If you don't have the account ready, maybe it's for the best if I just go," Maddie said. It was unbearable, having to go through all of this for a second time. "You can get in touch with me when there's something to talk about."

"No, wait," Eli insisted. "I do have something to talk about. It's not just that I don't like the way we left things. I don't want us to leave things at all."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I want you to come back."

It was the very thing she had dreamed he would say, but she had never imagined he could actually mean it. She couldn't believe it now. "Why would you want that?" she asked. "You don't want this. The way you responded when I told you..."

"That was unforgivable. I should never have acted like that. You took me by surprise — of course you did — but the baby is mine." He sighed. "All I could think about in that moment was making sure you were provided for, Maddie. All I could think about was the thing I've devoted my life to — working hard to make sure that no child of mine ever suffers the way I did. I wanted you to know that there would be money for your baby."

"I wasn't asking you for money."

"No. I know you weren't. But in that moment, it felt like the most important thing I



could do. You know I've been struggling at work," he said. "You know I lost a client."

"I know that."

"But what you said to me has been ringing in my ears since the last time we talked, Maddie. You told me that I had things backward, that I was putting work ahead of family. I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't let myself believe it. And then you walked out of my life and I realized that my dedication to my work had pushed half of my family away from me."

Had he called her family? Maddie trembled. Could he possibly mean all this? And if he did, could she accept it?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

“Charlie begged me to bring you back.”

“I can’t come back just for Charlie.”

“He’s the one who made me realize I needed you to come back,” Eli said. He reached across the table and took Maddie’s hand.

Maddie didn’t pull away. She couldn’t. She met his eyes instead, feeling breathless.

“I’m going to scale back my time at work,” Eli said. “I mean it this time. I know you want your child to have a father who’s actually involved. I want that for Charlie, too. And for us — for you, Maddie — I want us to see each other. To have time for each other. I want us to have... a real relationship.”

“You want us to have a relationship?” Even in her daydreams, the fantasies she’d tried to suppress, this was so far beyond anything she had imagined that she could hardly believe she was hearing it.

“I love you,” he said quietly. “I’m a better man because I know you, Maddie. I’m so sorry it took all this for me to realize that. But I would be a fool to let you go. I know I treated you badly, but if there’s even a chance you’d consider coming back to me, I have to beg for your forgiveness and hope you’ll be willing to consider it.”

“Are you really going to have time to step back from work?” Maddie asked him. “I do want this, Eli. What you’re saying — it’s exactly what I want. But I don’t know if I can let myself hope for it again. I believed in you, you know. I believed that things were going to be different when you said they were. That you were going to make a

real change and start coming home more often. And you did — for a while.”

“I know. I don’t want you to think you had anything to do with my failure to see it through,” Eli said. “It wasn’t because of the time you and I spent together. It wasn’t because we slept together that night. I have no regrets about that.”

“Not even now?”

“Especially not now. This has shown me what kind of life I want to have moving forward. I’m grateful for this,” he said. “I’m grateful for this child, and for you, and if I’ve lost you through my own carelessness, I don’t know how I’ll ever forgive myself.”

Maddie shook her head. “You haven’t,” she whispered. “You haven’t lost me. If you mean what you’re saying now...”

“I do. Truly.”

“Then of course I want to give this another try,” she said.

She was trembling all over, terrified of her own words, afraid that she would live to regret this moment. And yet, if she didn’t accept what he was saying, she knew for certain that she would regret it. There would never be another chance like the one she was being given right now — a chance to make things right with the father of her child and the man she knew she loved.

He got to his feet. “Come with me.”

“What? Where are we going?”

“I need you to see something,” he said. “Something that I think will make clear to

you how serious I am about all this.”

“You don’t have to prove yourself to me.”

“Yes, I do. I know how much my actions have hurt you, Maddie. I do need to show you that I’m going to be a better man now. Come with me.”

She got to her feet and followed him out of the cafe, perplexed. They crossed the road, and even then, Maddie didn’t realize where they were going. It wasn’t until they stopped in front of the empty storefront that she understood.

“I made you a ballet studio once,” he said. “Would you allow me to do it again?”

“You mean... but I can’t afford the rent on a place like this,” she said.

“If I’m going to be stepping back from my company, it might help us to have a second income.”

He didn’t need a second income. She had lived in his house — she had worked for him. That wasn’t what this was about. “What are you saying?”

“I bought this property, Maddie. I own it.” He produced a small silver key. “I’d like us to turn it into your dance studio.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“If that would make you happy.”

“Eli... my God, what if I had said no to all this? You’d have been stuck with this property and nothing to do with it.”

“But you’re not saying no.” He reached out and rested a hand on her shoulder, sending butterflies through her. “I took a chance, Maddie. I owed you that much. Will you take the studio? You can become a dance instructor, just like you wanted, and we can spend our lives together.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:19 am*

It was too much. It was everything she had dreamed of, and it was all being handed to her. Maddie felt tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

“Is something wrong?” Eli asked, concerned.

She shook her head and wiped the tears away. “You didn’t have to do this. It’s perfect. But it’s too much.”

“It isn’t,” he told her. “I want this for you. I want this for us. And if it makes you happy...”

“It does.”

“Anything that makes you happy could never be too much, Maddie. I’ve taken too long to realize how lucky I am to have you in my life, but if you can give me this second chance, I promise you that I’ll never let myself forget it again.”

He held out his arms, and Maddie’s resistance crumbled.

She stepped into his embrace, and as he kissed her, she marveled at the fact that dreams truly could come true.

## EPILOGUE

### TWO YEARS LATER: ELI

Maddie was at the door when Eli arrived home. “I thought you’d be here sooner,” she

said. “I’ve been waiting.”

Eli laughed and handed Leanne to her mother. The little girl dove into Maddie’s arms, and Maddie gave her a snuggle. “Did you have fun at the playground with Daddy?” she asked.

“We had a great time,” Eli said. “She sure loves the swings. I think she would go every day if we would take her.”

“I’m sure you would!” Maddie laughed. “But we’ve got things to do today. I’ve been dying for you two to get back.”

“Ready to go over to the studio?”

“Oh, I was born ready. I can’t believe we’re finally opening tonight.”

Eli privately agreed. It had been almost two years since the day he had bought the dance studio, and it felt like even longer. They had been working all that time, getting the studio ready for opening day, but on plenty of occasions it had felt almostimpossibly far away. Now, though, the day was here. It was opening afternoon, and they would be taking sign-ups from kids who were interested in studying dance with Maddie.

It was beautiful to see the woman he loved achieving her dream like this.

It couldn’t have happened without months and months of hard work. Eli had offered to outsource the labor, to hire people to take care of everything so that Maddie could just walk into the studio when it was ready to go, but she had declined that offer. “I’ve dreamed of this for too long to do it like that,” she’d told him. “I need to have a hand in everything. I want to make sure it all comes out just the way it is in my imagination.”

So Eli had reframed his plans and decided that he would help her make her vision a reality instead of paying someone else to do it. It had meant scaling back his time at the office even more, but that had turned out to be all right — he'd hired a new associate, and he found himself feeling more confident than ever before about the idea of being away from work.

Maddie had been supportive about that too. The first few weeks, when it had been the most difficult to stay away from the office, she had reassured him. “Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it,” she said. “If you lose a client, we can deal with that. Look at how happy Charlie is.”

She had been right about that part. Eli had never seen his son as happy as he'd been just after Maddie had moved back in, when Eli had started committing in earnest to spending more time at home. It solidified his belief that Maddie had been correct all along. To stay at home with Charlie as much as possible had always been the right move. He would forever be grateful to her for helping him to realize that.

“Where is Charlie?” he asked, realizing that he hadn’t seen his son since arriving home.

“He’s in the back, practicing on his skateboard.”

“You know I can’t stand that skateboard.”

“And you know he’s determined to learn to ride it regardless of how we feel.” Maddie smiled. “By giving him permission, at least we can make him listen to us a little bit. He’s wearing his helmet and kneepads. That’s what’s most important. How bad can it really be?”

Eli grumbled a little but didn’t say anything.



Maddie smiled. “This is sweet,” she told him. “I love it when you get all protective.”

“You of all people know that people can get hurt doing sports.”

“I of all people know that’s no reason not to do them,” Maddie countered. “Do you think I’ve ever for one moment wished that I hadn’t become a dancer? It’s led me to some of the best things in my life. And now I’m going to be achieving the dream of a lifetime by opening this dance studio.”

“Well, that’s true,” Eli said with a smile.

“And I owe it all to you.”

“You don’t owe it all to me.”

“Eli, none of this would be happening if not for you. Of course I owe you for what you’ve given me.”

“You’ve given me everything too,” Eli reminded her. “I had almost no relationship with my son when you came into our lives. I will never be able to fully repay you for what you did forme and Charlie. And then there’s Leanne, of course. You gave me a daughter. I thought it would be me and Charlie alone for the rest of my life, and because of you, that’s not true. I have a whole family now. What could possibly be any better?”

“I still can’t quite believe it all worked out sometimes,” Maddie admitted. “I was so sure it wouldn’t.”

“I know. I thought the same,” Eli said. “But here we are, and I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t be any happier.”

“Let me go get Charlie,” she said. “We can head over to the studio now.”

“No, I’ll get him,” Eli said. “You’ve got your hands full.”

Maddie smiled gratefully. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll get Leanne into the car.”

Eli went out back and found Charlie on the patio. He stood and watched for a moment, not wanting to interrupt, but Charlie sensed his presence and looked over.

“Hey, Dad,” he called, jumping down from the skateboard. “Where’s Leanne?”

Eli felt a sense of warmth. He was still getting used to how much it delighted him when his children wanted to be around each other — which they usually did. They had already formed a tight bond, and it was hard to believe he had so nearly missed out on the chance to see Charlie become a big brother. It would have been tragic if he’d lost this chance and never realized it.

“Maddie’s putting Leanne in the car,” he told Charlie. “It’s opening day for the dance studio, remember?”

“Are you going to sign me up for ballet lessons?”

“Do you want to take ballet lessons?”

“Yeah, I want to try it,” Charlie said.

Eli was pleased. At eight years old, Charlie was starting to discover the idea that he was too cool to hang around with his parents, though Eli suspected they still had a couple more years before that really set in. He had wondered if Charlie would avoid a dance class taught by Maddie, and it was good to see that that wasn’t the case.

“We can sign you up,” Eli said. “I’m sure Maddie would love it if you were the first person to sign up for her classes. Put your board up and let’s go out to the car. You and Leanne can play at the studio while we get things going.”

“Fun.” Charlie propped his board against the side of the house. He had been able to play at the dance studio a few times already, once the construction had been finished, and he and Leanne always had a fun time with the giant mirrors. “Hey, Dad, maybe

you should work at the dance studio.”

Eli had to laugh. “What would I do there?” he asked. “I couldn’t teach lessons. I don’t know how to dance. All the students would get worse if they tried to copy my moves.” He’d never thought he would see the day when Charlie suggested he take on additional work, but he had been home so often lately that his son’s fear of losing him to the office seemed finally to have disappeared.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Charlie agreed. “You’re a terrible dancer.”

Eli chuckled. “Go get in the car,” he said. “Maddie is waiting on us, and she’s pretty excited, so let’s not make her wait any longer than necessary.”

They went out to the car. Charlie got into the backseat next to Leanne and began to play with her. Maddie was waiting beside the car, and Eli went up to her and put his arms around her.

“Are you ready for this?” he murmured.

“Ready as I’ll ever be. I haven’t felt ready for anything since the day I met you.”

“I hope that’s not a bad thing.”

“Trust me, it’s the best thing possible,” she said. “Every moment has taken me by surprise, and I hope those surprises keep on coming for as long as we know each other.”

“I feel exactly the same,” Eli assured her. Every moment, he was stunned by how much joy he found in Maddie and in the family they had created together. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve this much happiness, but he did know that he would never stop feeling grateful that he had found it. It was impossible to imagine a moment when he would take this for granted.

“I’m so proud of you,” he told Maddie.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” she replied.

They’d said those words to one another countless times over the past few months, but the truth had never gone out of them. And when he kissed her, the passion was as bright and potent as it had ever been — and Eli knew that it always would be.

The End