



CHAPTER ONE

It was happy hour, but murder was on the menu.

Death by daiquiri—or more accurately by cocktail glass—was seconds away from killing my new career as a restaurant server when my shift supervisor, Claire, swooped in and liberated the glass from my hands. She set it safely on the table while giving a smile to the sleazy middle-aged man who'd just doled out his fourth inappropriate comment about my body since I'd started serving him and his buddy twenty minutes ago.

I opened my mouth to give the creep a piece of my mind, but Claire was still in damage-control mode. She clamped an arm around my shoulders and steered me toward the back of the restaurant.

She spoke in a low, stern voice that contrasted starkly with the smile she kept on her face. “We don’t dump drinks on our customers, Emersyn.”

“Actually, I was planning to smash the glass over his head,” I said, shooting a glare over my shoulder at my intended victim.

He winked at me, and my stomach churned.

“We don’t do that either.”

“You might want to rethink that policy,” I said, seething.

Claire pushed me into the small employee break room. It was

empty, the fluorescent lights buzzing and flickering overhead. Claire took me by the shoulders and turned me around so we faced each other.

“I’m taking over your shift,” she informed me.

I was about to protest when she cut me off.

“Chad wants to see you in his office.”

My stomach sank. “Again? That can’t be good.”

Chad, the restaurant’s manager, wasn’t exactly an Emersyn Gray fan. I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t mixed up all *that* many orders, and I’d only broken a few dishes. Okay, so maybe I knew why. I had to admit—to myself, not Chad—that I wasn’t exactly a natural at waitressing.

Claire tipped her head toward the door. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

I gulped a breath of air, barely getting it past the lump of apprehension in my throat, and then started down the hall toward Chad’s office.



Half an hour later, I sat on a park bench in the West Bronx, jobless for the second time in a month. I longed to drown my sorrows in a caffè mocha with extra whip, but I was painfully aware of the sorry state of my bank account balance. I couldn’t afford to indulge in unnecessary treats. I also couldn’t indulge in a pity party. Not for long, anyway.

I gave myself one more minute to stare morosely at the pigeons pecking at the ground beneath an oak tree. Then I heaved myself up off the bench and set a course toward home.

I’d almost reached the edge of the park when a familiar voice cried out with delight.

“Auntie Em!”

My spirits lifted even as my heart clenched. My seven-year-old niece, Livy, let go of her babysitter’s hand and barreled toward me,

her two strawberry blonde braids flying out behind her like kite tails. She launched herself at me so hard that she nearly knocked the breath out of me. I had to take a step backward to keep my balance as she wrapped her thin arms around my middle.

“Hey, Livysaurus.” I kissed the top of her head. “What mischief have you been causing today?”

She giggled, releasing me and looking up at me with blue eyes so familiar that my heart clenched again. “I don’t cause mischief. Mrs. Nagy bought me a hot dog from Alfonso!”

Alfonso was a hot dog vendor who often stationed his cart at the far end of the park. He always had a smile and a warm greeting for us whenever we saw him, even though I rarely bought his wares.

“Lucky you,” I said to Livy before addressing my eighty-something neighbor, who’d just reached us. “Thank you, Mrs. Nagy. You didn’t have to do that.”

“It was my pleasure.” She had a comforting voice, laced with a Hungarian accent. “I enjoy having a youngster around to spoil.”

Zita Nagy and her husband had no children or grandchildren of their own. They lived in the unit next door to me and Livy, and they’d been a godsend over the last several months since we’d moved into the apartment building. They never let me pay them a dime for babysitting Livy, insisting that it was a treat for them, one that they always looked forward to.

“Well, I appreciate it,” I said as we walked along the sidewalk at the edge of the park. “Thank you.”

Livy held my hand and skipped along beside me. “I thought you had to work for hours and hours.”

“I got off early.” I kept my voice light, not wanting to let on that there was anything wrong. I must have succeeded, because Livy kept skipping happily.

“Can we have ice cream?” she asked, eyeing the ice cream parlor across the street.

“Not tonight, sweetie,” I said with a pang of regret.

I felt even worse about denying her request when she accepted my response without protest.

“If you don’t need me anymore tonight,” Mrs. Nagy said as we neared a crosswalk, “I think I’ll stop in at the corner store before it closes.”

“Of course,” I said. “Thanks so much for looking after Livy.”

“Anytime, dear.” She smiled. “Goodbye, Olivia.”

“Bye, Mrs. Nagy.” Livy waved as the elderly woman headed down the street.

We waited for the light to change and then crossed the road. Another few minutes of walking took us to the Deco Mirage, more often known simply as the Mirage. Back in its glory days in the 1920s, the building was a popular art deco hotel. It still boasted the geometric stained-glass windows, plaster detailing, courtyard fountain, and goddess statue in the lobby that could be seen in the old photos hanging on the walls in the entranceway, but some of the plaster had crumbled away and the fountain was no longer running. Moss had covered the stonework, obliterating many of the details of the mermaid sculpture. Inside the building, cracks ran through the walls and some of the windows were foggy, their seals broken. The building could have been a metaphor for my life. Once shiny and full of promise. Now crumbling, slowly but surely.

Or maybe not so slowly.

I looked up at the building with a sympathetic and self-pitying sigh. Then I reminded myself to be grateful for what I did have. My beautiful niece. A roof over our heads. And since we didn’t live on the top floor, the leak in the roof didn’t bother us much.

What had once been luxury suites had been broken into apartment units that had seen better days. For the last few decades, the building had catered to the fifty-five-plus community. Officially, it still did, but its low occupancy had left the landlord desperate for tenants. That was a good thing for me and Livy. The run-down building offered some of the cheapest rent around—at least within my niece’s school district—and although most of the other resi-

dents were at least thirty years older than me, I tried to look at the positives: Grab bars in the shower—extra safety! Sweet elderly neighbors—free cookies and babysitting!

I spotted one of those sweet neighbors as soon as we entered the Mirage's lobby. Except Mr. Zoltán Nagy didn't seem quite so sweet at the moment. The man I'd only ever known as quiet and kind was currently chasing the building superintendent around the lobby, brandishing a croquet mallet over his head like a weapon.

I spotted dead in my tracks.

"Crazy old geezer!" the superintendent, Freddie Hanover, yelled as he dodged a swing of the croquet mallet.

Livy bounced up and down at my side. "Run, Freddie, run!" she cried, as if the men were playing an entertaining game.

Mr. Nagy let out a string of angry Hungarian as he took another swing at Freddie's head.

I was still frozen in place, wondering if I should intervene somehow or rush Livy up to the safety of our apartment, when the only other resident of the building under the age of fifty-five stepped off the elevator.

"Whoa!" Bodie Chase jumped back just in time to avoid getting creamed by Freddie and Mr. Nagy as they ran past.

It took Bodie approximately two seconds to assess the situation and jump into the fray. He grabbed the croquet mallet from Mr. Nagy and placed a hand on the elderly man's chest, bringing him to a halt. Freddie huddled by the elevators, glaring at Mr. Nagy as they both tried to catch their breath.

As for me, I breathed more easily. With Bodie on the scene, surely everything would remain under control. The thirty-year-old bartender from unit 505 stood over six feet tall and looked like he hit the gym several days a week. His hair was a more golden shade of blond than my own, and his eyes were as blue as a tropical ocean. Translation: He was built. And hot.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's calm things down." Bodie let the mallet hang from one hand. "What's going on here?"

“He threatened to confiscate my croquet equipment!” Mr. Nagy cried, his English more heavily accented than his wife’s.

“You’re always leaving it lying around the courtyard,” Freddie shot back, still keeping his distance from Mr. Nagy. “I nearly broke my leg when I tripped on that metal hoop!”

Bodie turned those brilliant blue eyes my way and gave me a reassuring nod. “I’ve got this.”

I mouthed, *Thank you*, and then pushed Livy ahead of me through the door to the stairwell.

“What did you do at school today?” I asked as we hurried up to the third floor. I didn’t want her attention lingering on what we’d just witnessed, even if she hadn’t quite realized that the men hadn’t been playing a game.

Livy regaled me with stories about her teacher and classmates while we made our way to our apartment. Later, as Livy splashed about in the bathtub singing to herself, I flopped down on the couch and closed my eyes, a wave of exhaustion and defeat nearly crushing me.

The money that my brother, Ethan, had saved for his and Livy’s future had been eaten up by his medical bills once he got sick with cancer and started his slow decline toward the end of his life. I thought that my niece and I would be okay financially after his death. Not well-off, by any means, but okay. Then my ex-boyfriend stole most of my savings, and my bad luck only continued from there. I lost my steady job as a copywriter thanks to financial restructuring, and now my career as a restaurant server was in the gutter too. I had rent to pay, a child to feed. I needed to get my life together, but it seemed like the harder I tried, the more it fell apart.

I allowed myself two minutes of distraction, thinking about Bodie Chase with his mesmerizing eyes and corded muscles. He and I had flirted—just a little bit—a couple of times when our paths had crossed and Livy hadn’t been present. It would have been so easy to give in to the temptation to do more than flirt, but I needed to keep my life focused on Livy.

Besides, I couldn't trust my judgment when it came to men. I wouldn't have been in such a precarious financial situation if my ex hadn't run off with my life savings. I should have seen through him before he had a chance to leave me practically penniless, but in true Emersyn style, I'd remained clueless until it was too late.

So now I'd sworn off men, at least until Livy was older and I was wiser. If the latter ever happened.

Before my thoughts about Bodie strayed into X-rated territory, I forced myself up off the couch and reminded Livy to brush her teeth. After we'd read to each other from books of her choice, I tucked her in, kissed her forehead, and shut off the light.

"Sweet dreams, Livysaurus," I said, lingering in her bedroom doorway.

"Night night, Auntie Emersyn," she replied, as she did every evening.

My heart swelled as she snuggled beneath the covers with her purple dinosaur stuffie and closed her eyes. A surge of fierce love for my niece took my breath away. It was quickly followed by a wave of grief so strong that it nearly made me gasp.

I backed out of Livy's bedroom and shut the door all but a crack.

My life might have been a hot mess, and I was probably in grave danger of having my Competent Adult card revoked, but I knew without a doubt that I'd do everything in my power to keep that little girl safe, healthy, and happy. Which meant I needed a plan, and fast.

Excerpted from **Definitely Maybe Not a Detective** by Sarah Fox.
Copyright © 2026 by Sarah Fox. Excerpted by permission of
Bantam Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. All
rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or
reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.