

A muscular man with a light beard is the central figure. He is wearing a black halter top that is shaped like a fish, with a small fin-like detail at the bottom. He is also wearing blue denim jeans with a brown leather belt. He is standing in a hospital room, with a metal bed frame behind him and a white lab coat draped over his shoulders. To the left, an orange hospital chair is partially visible. The lighting is bright and clinical.

LAST
ON THE
LIST

AMY DAWES

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Dedicated to Book Tok...thank you for making me a #1 Best Seller this year. And if this book is dirtier than all my other books, I blame you entirely.

CHAPTER 1



“This is going to be the worst summer of my life,” Everly grumbles from the office chair beside me. “I wish Mom wasn’t leaving. She ruined my whole summer.”

I swivel to face my daughter’s slumped frame. Her feet are dangling off the edge of her chair, scraping over the bald office carpet in my boardroom with tiny, frustrated kicks. I reach over and tug on her blond ponytail. “Don’t be sad, kid. I have so many plans for you this summer. You’re going to be too busy to miss your mom.”

My eleven going on twenty-year-old looks up at me with her lethal robin-blue eyes that make me doubt my manhood every single day. “Can’t wait,” she mumbles flatly.

I sigh heavily and chuck her chin. “We just need to find the right nanny to help us out, and then we’re set. It would help if you weren’t so picky.”

“Dad, the last one said her favorite TV show was *Maury*,” Everly snipes, shoving the last one’s résumé in front of me. “That’s the show that Mom grounded me from watching because one time when I saw it on TV, a woman took out her fake tooth, spanked her own butt, and said she loved doing drugs.”

My chest contracts with that horrific image, reminding me yet again of all the things I missed out on after separating from Everly’s mom. “I never heard about you watching that.”

Everly turns forward with a shrug. “Mom told me not to tell you. She said you were too busy to be bothered by it.”

My jaw cracks as I turn my frustration toward the boardroom table instead of my kid. I tap the clicker of my pen insistently. My ex, Jessica, and I have been divorced since Everly was two, and most of the time, we have a great co-parenting relationship. Some would say admirable. But Jess has a habit of placing me in the “need to know” category when our daughter is at her house. She claims it’s because I’m busy with my company, and she doesn’t want to bother me with things she can handle. But I have told her time and time again, Everly is my exception to that rule every fucking time. I want to know what goes on in her life...even if it’s watching a horrible television show.

I’ll admit, things are a bit hectic for me. My franchise development company is in the process of partnering with another company in Denver, which would double the size of Fletcher Industries here in Boulder, Colorado. Honestly, the merger is huge for more than just my corporation. It will bring in more jobs and business to the growing city of Boulder and make my corporation that I started in my twenties the largest developer in the Rocky Mountains.

This is huge for me.

Which is why the fact that Jessica took a film job in Bulgaria for three months this summer of all summers is a bit of an inconvenience.

Normally, I only have Everly three out of four weekends a month. Friday night through Monday morning. That was something we set up in our custody agreement once Everly started school. It was important to Jess and me to ensure Everly’s school life did not get disrupted too much during the week. And having Everly on the weekends meant I could give her quality time away from my office. I kill myself Monday through Friday so that when I pick Everly up at six o’clock on Friday, I can give her my full attention. I don’t take a single work call until she is fast asleep...never mind have a social life. The few friends I have rarely hear a word from me on my Everly weekends. They respect the boundary.

However, it’s been ten years since I’ve had Everly at my house full time. Which means, like it or not, I need to step it up and find someone to help me with her. I want this summer to go well. Everly is getting older, and eventually, it will be her choice whose house she spends more time at. Mine or her mom’s. I would love it if, after this summer, she would *want* to spend

more time with me. It won't be long before she's graduating from high school and going off to college to God knows where.

My chest aches at that thought, so I clear my throat to refocus on the task at hand before I let thoughts of the future overwhelm me. "Well, we still have one more person to interview. Hopefully, the agency saved the most qualified for last." I clench my jaw to hide my doubt. The agency owner and I haven't exactly been seeing eye to eye these past few weeks. I'd feel mildly guilty about being so high maintenance if she wouldn't have just sent me a candidate who listed the *Maury Show* as her favorite bingeable series.

Jesus Christ.

I glance down at my watch and frown. "Our last interviewee is officially late."

"Might as well scratch her off the list now," Everly drones. "You flip your lid whenever we're running late."

"I do not flip my lid." Those words feel strange coming out of my mouth.

The small smile on the corner of Everly's lips shows me she thinks I'm full of shit. God, she really makes me wonder who the parent is sometimes.

A loud bang thunders from behind us, turning both Everly's and my focus to the bank of glass windows that separates us from the rest of my office. My eyes widen when a blur of orange comes streaking by, running straight for the boardroom entrance. The person flings it open so fast that it thuds against the wall with a thunderous crack and has both Everly and me flinching.

Wide eyes swerve our direction. "Hey girl heyyy!" the woman says as she waves animatedly in our direction like she didn't just cause a scene.

A sputtered giggle erupts from my kid.

The woman bustles over to us, breathing loudly as she struggles to say, "My sister told me you were a stickler for punctuality." She pauses to take a deep breath, tugging on the chest of her top to cool herself down. "I literally ran down that long hallway for you. For the record, I do not run." She gestures toward where she just came from.

My brows pinch together as I glance down at what I can now discern as an orange tie-dyed sweatsuit the woman is wearing. "Who is your sister?" I ask, glancing at the strip of pale skin revealed below the cropped sweatshirt.

“Rebecca Barlow! She owns the nanny agency.” The woman pulls out the seat right next to me and flops noisily down into it. She quickly runs her fingers through her cropped black hair, getting hung up on several tangles.

I glance over at the seats across the table where every other candidate we’ve interviewed for the past two weeks has sat. But not this one. I adjust my tie and grind out, “Ah...Rebecca.”

The woman covers her grimace. “Yeah, I think the feeling is mutual.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, angling my head toward her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing!” She holds her hands up defensively. “I’ve just heard you two have butted heads a few times.”

I twist my jaw and shove the list of nanny rejects away from her prying eyes. “So I take it she sent you here to let me go as a client? We still have one more nanny to interview. A Cassandra...” My voice trails off when I see the last name.

She holds her hand out to me. “Cassandra Barlow. So nice to meet you, Max.”

I reach out and take her offered hand, noticing the slight clamminess from her run while cursing myself for not putting two and two together earlier. “I prefer to be called Mr. Fletcher.”

Her plump lips twitch with poorly concealed amusement. “My apologies, Mr. Fletcher,” she says in a mock British accent. “That’s a great name to say with a British accent.” I open my mouth to reply as she adds, “And for the record, I was early, but your receptionist out there wanted to see my ID before I came back here, and I left it in my car, so I had to run back down to get it, and well...that was the two-minute delay. I’m a very slow runner. And I was really bummed I didn’t get to hang in your waiting area. It’s aces! Did I see kombucha in that mini fridge?” She leans close to me, and the smell of coconut wafts over me as she winks. “Very nice touch caring about your staff’s gut health.”

“It’s not for the staff. It’s for clients,” I announce. My eyes blink as I try to figure out why the fuck we’re talking about gut health. “And most people bring their identification to interviews. And most dress—”

“Dress for the job they want!” Cassandra interrupts, puffing her rather large chest out proudly. “Nothing says number-one nanny like homemade tie-dye.”

She looks past me and smiles warmly. “You must be Everly. Love that top, by the way.”

Everly tugs on her bright pink tee. “I love yours more. You made that yourself?” Everly presses up against my arm as she struggles to look around me. “That’s so cool. I love tie-dye.”

“Who doesn’t!” Cassandra barks back. “This was actually a reject. You should see some of my masterpieces.”

“Didn’t think a masterpiece would be good for a job interview?” I grumble under my breath, fully intending for Cassandra to hear me.

Everly pinches my arm through my suit and turns a bright, genuine smile to the orange blob beside me. “So...Cassandra, what do you like to do for fun?”

“Call me Cozy.” Cassandra winks at Everly. “I was a really chubby baby, so everyone called me Cozy Cassie...pause for shock and awe.” She gestures to her body, which is apparently supposed to confirm her coziness? “Anyway, I decided to rock the Cozy instead of Cassie as I got older. It’s more fun, don’t you think?”

“Definitely,” Everly says with a giggle.

I huff out a forced laugh that Cassandra does not give notice to. She leans past me toward Everly, pressing me back in my seat before she brushes my chest. “You know what I like to do for fun?” She pauses and waggles her dark eyebrows playfully. “Nothing.”

Everly jerks back with a puzzled look on her face. “Nothing?”

Cassandra nods and smiles, flashing her round emerald eyes at my daughter. “A whole lot of nothing. My life philosophy is why do more when you can do less.”

I roll my eyes and sigh. I’m not surprised. Her résumé had next to nothing on it. This must be some cruel joke Rebecca is playing on me for being a pain in her ass client.

“Isn’t doing nothing kind of boring?” Everly asks, her brows pinched together with rapt fascination.

“Only if you have a boring mind,” Cassandra quips as she props her chin on her hand and narrows her gaze at my daughter. “Do you have a boring mind, Everly?”

Everly scrunches up her nose as if she’s trying to think seriously about this ridiculous question. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t think you do either...I can usually spot a boring mind.” Cassandra’s eyes slide to mine, and her intent is as subtle as her entrance into my boardroom.

I clear my throat, knowing I need to take over this interview that’s venturing on completely ridiculous with a candidate who listed Subway as her last place of gainful employment four years ago. “I’m afraid our life philosophies don’t quite match up, Cassandra. My ex and I like Everly to stay busy and feed her mind. She’s on the swim team and does gymnastics. She has piano lessons and her chess club. We have her booked up for several camps this summer. Oh, and her book club—”

“I’m in a book club...What are you guys reading right now?” Cassandra interrupts.

“It’s called *Mostly The Honest Truth*...it’s kind of sad.” Everly looks disappointed.

I frown and open my mouth to respond to that but am cut off once again. “I love a good tearjerker!” Cassandra gushes, adding excitedly, “Especially the kind that makes your nose run. It’s like your body’s way of cleansing your soul.”

“Cleansing your soul?” I mock.

“I never thought about it like that!” Everly peals with a thoughtful smile, erasing the sadness in her voice she had a moment ago.

Cassandra returns Everly’s smile and shoots a small wink at me before refocusing on Everly. “It’s fun to think about things, isn’t it? That’s what doing nothing gives you the opportunity to do. Let your imagination run wild and daydream.”

“So that’s really your proposal with my daughter this summer? To do nothing?” I ask dryly, hoping she has a backup response that she’s going to pull out of her back pocket at any moment.

Cassandra nods proudly. “We’ll also do a lot of sitting. I’m an expert at sitting,” she deadpans.

“Okay...I think we’ve heard enough, Cassandra.” I move to stand, but she reaches out and touches my arm, halting me in my tracks.

“Cozy,” she corrects with a wink.

The teasing look in her eyes causes my skin to tighten. I do my best to shake it off as she refocuses on Everly to share with her the last book that made her cry. Her hand slides off my arm, and my eyes lock on the way her index finger trails off the fabric of my suit.

I'm left struggling to shake this silvery feeling her delicate touch has left on my arm, so I take a moment to inspect Cassandra a bit closer now that her focus is off me. Her facial features are round, a faint dimple appearing in her cheek as she talks animatedly to my daughter. Her alabaster skin is a stunning contrast to her nearly black hair cropped bluntly just above her shoulders. She has shockingly plump lips slathered in a pale pink gloss that thankfully doesn't match the orange jumpsuit that looks like something a teenager would wear. Her ample curves indicate she's very much not a child.

"How old are you?" I blurt out and then blanch at how unprofessional of a question that is. I close my eyes and curse under my breath. "I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that."

"I'm twenty-six, Big Daddy," Cassandra replies with another wink and then immediately dives back into conversation with my daughter.

Big Daddy? I frown at that very unpleasant label. Jesus Christ, so unprofessional. No fucking way...over my dead body. This will not work. I click my tongue and bring out my CEO voice. "Cassandra...I thank you for coming in, but I'm afraid—"

"You're hired!" Everly bursts out, standing up so she's eye level with me. She thrusts her hand across my face and reaches for Cassandra's, mimicking me to a T how I've handled many successful boardroom transactions.

My mouth hangs open as I sit frozen, watching Cassandra stand in what feels like slow motion to take Everly's hand and accept the offer.

"This is so awesome!" Cassandra shakes Everly's hand so hard, she starts to giggle. "This summer is going to be GOAT!"

"Goats?" I exclaim, finally breaking free of my stunned-stupid response to my daughter taking over this meeting. How is Everly so charmed by this...this...I don't even know what to call a person like Cassandra. "No one said anything about farm animals."

Cassandra and Everly burst out laughing like they've been buddies their entire life. Everly places her slender fingers on my shoulder in a way that makes me feel like the eleven-year-old in the room. "Dad, GOAT means greatest of all time."

My shoulders slump. "Oh."

Everly leans over to Cassandra and whispers loudly, "I'm so glad this worked out. If we didn't hire someone today, my dad was totally going to

get a case of his stress poops again.”

“Everly!” My eyes fly wide when Cassandra turns her green gaze to me. I push a nervous hand through my hair and quickly rush out, “I don’t get stress poops. I don’t know what that kid’s talking about.”

Cassandra reaches out and pats me on the other shoulder. “Hey Mr. Fletcher, no judgment here. Maybe you should try some of that kombucha out there you won’t let your staff have? It’s really good for the digestive system.”

I groan and pinch the bridge of my nose. This summer is going to be a disaster.

CHAPTER 2



“Rebecca just told me you’re moving into this guy’s guesthouse?” Dakota hollers to me from somewhere in my sister’s spare bedroom that I’ve been living in for the past few months. I’m tucked away in the small walk-in closet, so it’s hard to hear her.

“Be right out!” I call loudly before grabbing an arm full of clothes on hangers. When I emerge, I peer over the top of my sweatshirts to find my childhood bestie sacked out on my bed, popping one of my sour gummy worms into her mouth. “The guesthouse was a perk of the nanny job I accepted. And really, the only reason I agreed to interview in the first place.”

“And because you’re ready for a freaking job,” my older sister’s voice chirps as she pokes her head into my room.

Rolling my eyes, I hook the clothes on a metal bar inside a garment box I picked up earlier today. “I get it, Bec...you’re sick of me.”

“I’m not sick of you.” She pins me with a look. “However, I didn’t fully expect my sister to be such an active part of my first year of marriage.”

My shoulders sag. “Jacob loves me. We play gin rummy together all the time.”

“Exactly,” Rebecca scoffs. “Maybe I’d like to play gin rummy with my husband?”

“Would you?” I ask, surprised by that remark. Rebecca is more of a Netflix and do her nails type of girl.

“God no, I hate cards.” She confirms my suspicion. “But that doesn’t take away from the fact that this is the perfect job to get you moving again. There’s taking a break, and then there’s taking a *break*.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Dakota agrees, licking the sour sugar off her fingers.

“Well...I’m still in the middle of my Great Defrost,” I huff out defensively and move toward the bed to snatch my gummy worms out of my former best friend’s hands. “And moving back in with Mom and Dad would have been hell.”

Rebecca sighs knowingly. Our parents are good people, but they live on acreage outside of Boulder with a few farm animals they raise as a hobby along with their day jobs. And as much as I loved doing chores for our small flock of ewes who were all labeled with old lady names before and after school when I was a kid, it just wasn’t what I was up for when I moved back home.

Which means that ever since I quit my job in Denver and moved back to Boulder, my mom has been watching me like a ticking time bomb, just waiting to see what I’m going to do with my life next.

“Please just don’t screw this up,” Rebecca adds, tapping the doorframe. “Max Fletcher, uptight as he may be, is a very well-connected customer. Rich clients have rich friends, and those are the kind of referrals I need for my agency, okay?”

“You know what, Bec?” I scratch my head, my face growing serious. “Until you told me not to screw it up, I had totally planned on screwing it up. So I’m glad you made that distinction before I move in there tomorrow. We really dodged a bullet.”

She shoots me a lethal glare. “Just be professional, Cozy. I know how you can be sometimes.”

My jaw drops as she leaves me with that bolstering remark. I point at the empty doorway. “Can you believe her?”

Dakota shifts uncomfortably. “Maybe this job opportunity is good timing. I’m sensing a bit of tension between the Barlow sisters.”

I prop my hands on my hips, glowering at my sister’s guest room littered with my stuff. “I swear she doesn’t know me as an adult at all. Why would she act like I don’t know how to be professional?”

“Well...” Dakota’s traitorous voice rises in pitch.

I shoot her accusing eyes. “What?”

She winces slightly. “Don’t get me wrong, I love your ‘Great Defrost Cozy.’ It’s reminiscent of the original Cozy Cassie who I thought was gone forever from our childhood. But a lot has happened in the past six months. You changed from a woman we barely saw for years and was too busy to let her childhood bestie visit her in Denver to...whatever this version of yourself is. It’s a lot to take in.”

“I know, I know,” I mumble, shaking away the memory that always causes a pit to form in my stomach. “But don’t worry because Denver Cozy is long gone. And I have my Cozy Cassie hips back to prove it.” I bite the head off a gummy worm to accentuate my point before tossing the bag back onto the bed. I glance at myself in the mirror and tug at my oversized sweatshirt. I’ve gained a solid ten pounds since moving in with my sister, but it doesn’t bother me. It’s a sign that I’m happy. The slimmer version of myself that I was in Denver was stress-induced. I’d much rather be plus-sized and happy than mid-sized and miserable.

I retreat into my closet for a second armful.

“I do agree with your sister that it was time you finally got a job,” Dakota calls to me. “Selling your homemade charcuterie boards every other week was not going to get you out of Rebecca’s house anytime soon.”

“You know I don’t make my boards for the money,” I huff, nearly tripping on a dress that gets tangled under my feet as I come walking back out. “In fact, I wouldn’t sell any of my boards if you’d stop telling people about my hobby.”

“I know it’s your ‘therapy.’” Dakota finger quotes. “But you’re too good at it not to do something with it. I’m telling you, if you worked on those boards more than a few hours a week, you could turn your hobby into a legitimate business. I could help you set up an Etsy shop. Hell, you could sell the boards in my store!”

I eye my best friend with a look that tells her this conversation needs to stop. “This is my year of doing less. It’s like a gap year, remember?”

“At twenty-six years old.”

My lips thin, and Dakota finally gets the message and holds her hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine, I’ll shut up.” She pops another worm into her mouth.

I love my childhood bestie, and it’s been great to reconnect with her these past six months, but she’s just as lovingly pushy as she was when we were kids. She was always like the mini mom of our group, organizing

activities for all of us and checking in on the weekends. Harping on us to get our college applications in. Honestly, it's kind of shocking she has such a hip little business now. I swore she was going to go the young motherhood route with her high school sweetheart and have two or three kids by now. But she's single and a boss ass bitch of her own graphic tee shop downtown. She sells the cutest little slogan shirts and does a lot of mail-order business internationally because she teamed up with one of her college friends, who turned out to be this huge plus-sized designer in Aspen.

Tatianna Ashley kind of blew up when she was featured on an episode of *Project Runway*. She specializes in formal wear but has designed a line of size-inclusive tees for Dakota's store that really helped elevate her business from an Etsy shop to a legitimate storefront that has so much inventory she can't run it out of her home anymore. It's amazing.

I'm currently wearing a powder-blue sweatshirt from Tatianna's line that says Aspen Bae. All Dakota's stuff is cozy and chic with lots of retro styles and designs. I want my entire wardrobe to be from her shop. It's like...unpretentious loungewear with a sense of humor. She even has these fun tie-dye classes every week, which is where I made the orange set that I wore to my job interview a few days ago.

The job interview that I surprisingly nailed...with Everly, at least, who seems like a cool kid. Her dad, on the other hand...

"So what do you get paid for this nanny gig?" Dakota asks, chewing on another worm. "Is it a huge pay cut from your previous job?"

A small tremor runs through me at her mention of my past job. "I never asked what it pays."

"Are you serious?" Dakota gapes at me like I have two heads. "Does your sister know?"

I shrug and move over to my dresser to begin emptying its contents. "Probably."

"Your 'do less' vibe is going to be the death of me, Cozy." She sits up and pulls her phone out of her back pocket. "It has to be good. Max Fletcher is like...the only Boulder billionaire in existence."

"He's a billionaire?" I ask, turning to look at her. "No billionaire I ever met interviewed their own staff."

"Met a lot of billionaires, have you?" Dakota quirks a brow at me.