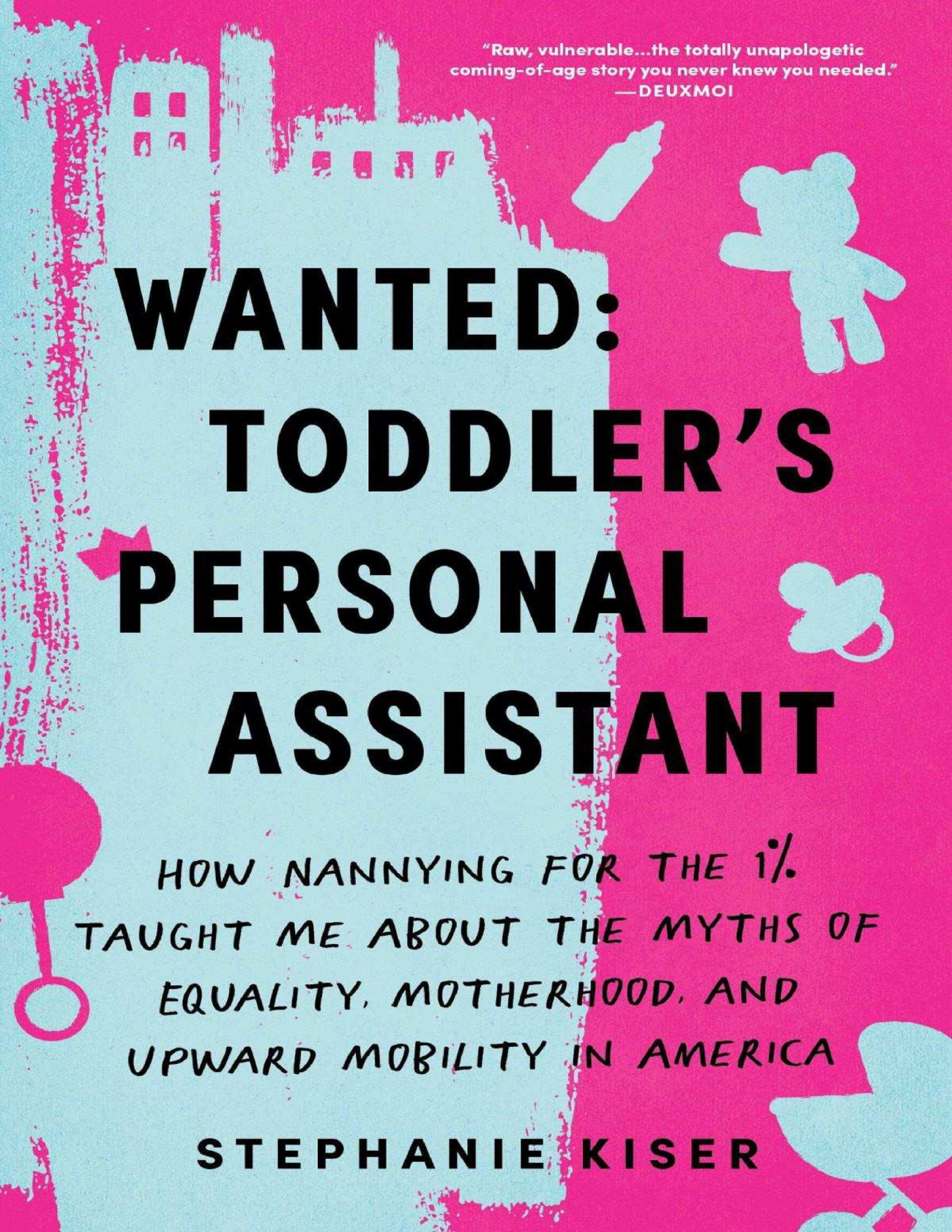


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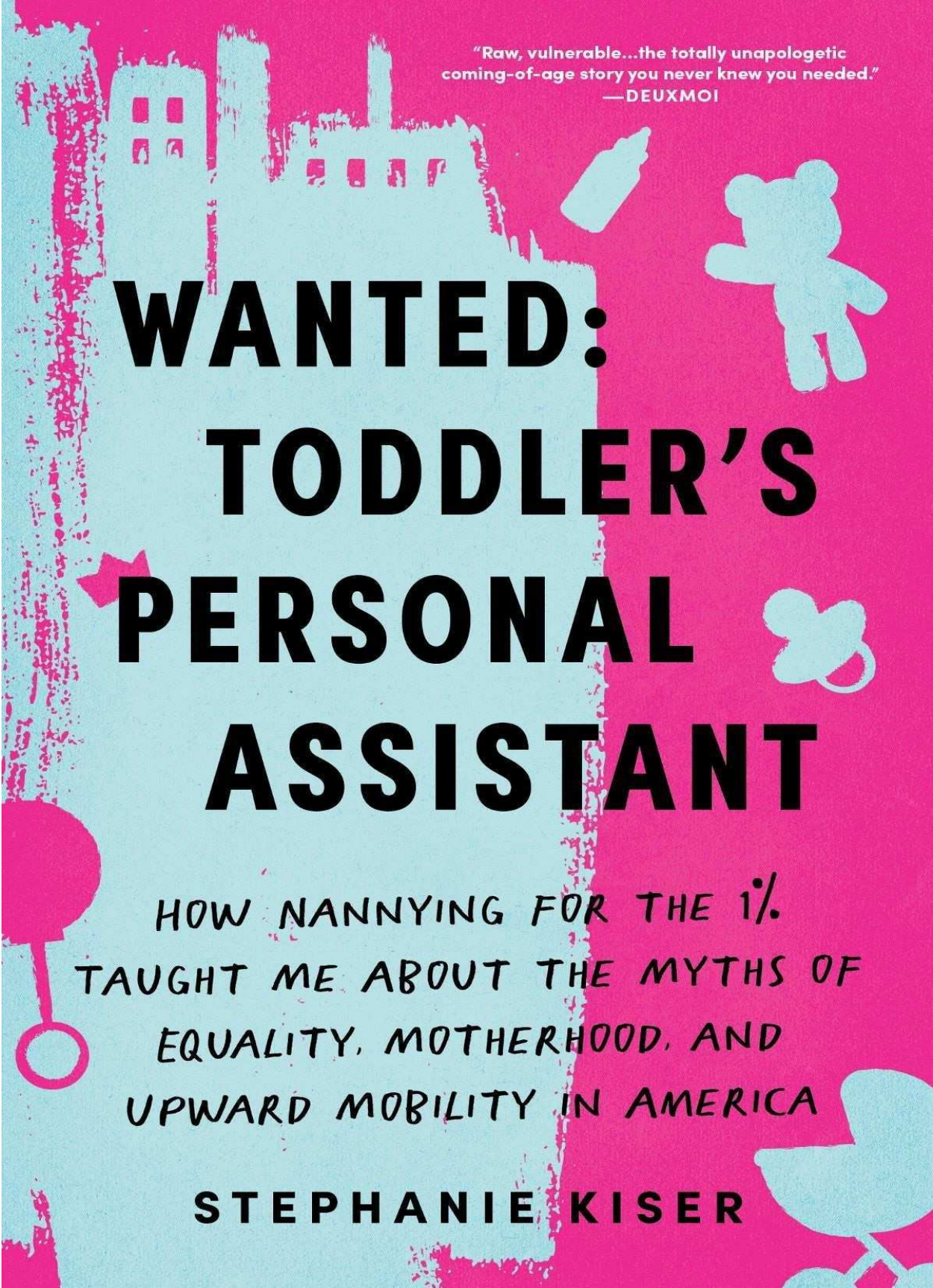
WANTED: TODDLER'S PERSONAL ASSISTANT

HOW NANNYING FOR THE 1%
TAUGHT ME ABOUT THE MYTHS OF
EQUALITY, MOTHERHOOD, AND
UPWARD MOBILITY IN AMERICA

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author’s present recollections of experiences over a period of time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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*For Gram,
Who has never let me know a day without unconditional love*

*For Lila,
How lucky I've been to grow through life with you*

*For my mom,
Who had the hardest job in the world and I've never remembered
to thank*

*And for the Kisers
FB, AP, Slimmy, Lid, and Bob P*

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1
We're All Rich Here

I'm waiting outside the school pickup line sandwiched between Drew Barrymore and a cousin of George W. Bush. Steve Martin and his wife are a few spots ahead, close enough that I can hear their conversation. But this is no longer of any particular interest to me. I have seen them enough times now that the initial shock has passed. Steve is always pleasant, though slightly aloof, and his wife bears an uncanny resemblance to Tina Fey. I'd overheard some of the moms whispering about this once, as if it were somehow offensive, but I disagree. Tina Fey is a trailblazer, a national treasure. Steve Martin is seventytwo years old and wearing Harry Potter-esque spectacles. As far as I can tell, Steve has hit the jackpot, and here I am casually standing feet away from him. Apparently, I too have hit the jackpot.

Black Escalades and Suburbans line the 64th Street block between Park and Madison. Hermès bags swing from the shoulders of women whose outfits cost upward of ten thousand dollars. Rings dazzle on dainty manicured fingers weighed down by huge stones. It's just another Tuesday afternoon in New York City, but for the parade of mothers who wait to pick up their children from The Episcopal School, every day is a runway show.

Not all the mothers passing through are attractive, but that matters very little. What the less fortunate ones lack in natural beauty, they make up for in sophistication. I watch wide-eyed as women stroll down the street in Jimmy Choos with four-inch heels. Some wear leather pants despite it being three in the afternoon on a weekday, and they all seem allergic to the sun, hiding their eyes behind thick-framed sunglasses. I attempt with little subtlety to peek into the Chanel shopping bag that one carries. Whatever is inside, I want it. All of these people have more money tied up in one diamond earring than I have in my checking and savings accounts combined.

"Oh, my God, Ellie, you look amazing! How long has it been?" I turn and catch two stay-at-home moms embracing. Their Cartier bracelets ding against one another as they pull back from a stiff hug.

"How was your summer?" Ellie asks. "Were you guys out East?"

I have seen Ellie at the school a handful of times, watching as her chauffeur curbed an oversized Range Rover. Ellie would appear just moments later, strutting one gorgeous Christian Louboutin in front of the other, her salon-blown hair fanning out in the wind as she headed to the waiting area. Ellie wasn't beautiful, perhaps not even pretty, but she was marvelous.

"Oh, yes! We were out East for August."

By "out East" they were of course referring to the Hamptons.

Ellie mentions a celebrity who bought the house next door and name-drops a billionaire she had drinks with in Montauk. Her friend reveals she snagged a reservation at the pop-up restaurant that *everyone* had been dying to try out and they sat right next to Beyoncé and Jay-Z, but she didn't recognize them. She leans in, confessing, "Really, I'm hardly

sure who they are!” They laugh, and the friend asks about Ellie’s husband, who, I learn, managed to work from home all of July and so they had been fortunate enough to enjoy their summer together, but Ellie knows lots of women who’d only seen their husbands on weekends.

I feel like I’ve listened to a hundred variations of this conversation from the women who wait here daily, enough to predict how it wraps up. For all their differences, Ellie and the other mothers have one universal agreement: it is really *very* hard surviving a summer in the Hamptons.

“The traffic in Southampton this year—it was brutal.”

“I know,” Ellie sighs. “It’s just so much harder out there.”

Still, despite all their suffering, one thing could be counted on: these mothers would return to both their misery and their massive beachside mansions the following June.

Their grievances are ridiculous, but I can’t help listening. I like imagining what life would look like if these were my concerns. *God, things would be easy*, I think.

I hear laughter from the start of the line, where a group of nannies is clustered. I’m curious what’s so funny and feel like a kid myself, desperate to be part of their friend group. The last few weeks, it’s felt like regardless of who I target, who I smile at or attempt small talk with, no one is interested. I consider approaching the nanny circle, but I sense they are no more open to inviting me into their crew than Ellie would be inviting me into hers. I do not fit into either category, the typical Upper East Side mother or the typical Upper East Side nanny and, as a result, I have absolutely zero friends here.

“Oh, but have you tried the Tracy Anderson gym?” Ellie squeals to her friend.

“No, I haven’t. Wait, how is it?”

“Honestly, it changed my life. My backside has never looked better, and the membership is only twelve thousand a year.”

At three thirty on the dot, the six-foot-five school security guard opens the heavy wooden doors and steps aside. We are free to go in and collect our children now, but the guard eyes us carefully. He reminds me of the nightclub bouncers I see on weekends in the Meatpacking District, except that he is not denying me entrance, and most of the people here are sober. This man takes his job very seriously, as he should. He is, after all, the protector of America’s wealthiest toddlers.

I thought it was all a bit absurd the first few times I picked up Ruby from school. The precautions felt over the top, but these are not your average little ones. These are the children of politicians, celebrities, and athletes. I have difficulty comprehending the privilege inherent in this sort of childhood. As I walk up a flight of stairs to the five-year-olds’ classroom, I try to think back to my first day of nursery school and remember something important: that I never had one.

Ruby skips toward me and immediately asks if we can go to the playground, listing her favorite ones as I follow her down the steps. Outside, I take Ruby’s hand, and we begin our eight-block stroll up Fifth Avenue. We pass perfectly maintained buildings on a

pristine sidewalk. In a city notorious for its filth, here is a single street so well kept, one would not fear going barefoot.

It is early October, six months since my college graduation and my fourth month in New York City. Walking Ruby home, I think how lucky I was to find this job.

I'd been living in an apartment in East Harlem, where safety is questionable, but I shared it with my best friend, Lila. We'd gone from high school weekends binge-watching *Downton Abbey* on my grandmother's beat-up couch to frequenting New York's trendiest nightclubs. In my mind, I was thriving.

Two months into my new life, the federal government began sending me notices for my student loans. Each week came an email reminding me of the burden. I had a *lot* of student debt—more than the total of two brand new BMWs. I'd never handled more than a couple hundred dollars when I took out the six-figure loan at eighteen, so it hadn't seemed like a big deal.

I searched tirelessly for a way to support myself while also keeping these loans out of default. I interviewed for various positions in the entertainment industry, having majored in writing for film and television in college, a degree that was proving incredibly useless in the real world. I wanted to write TV shows, dreamed of becoming the next Lena Dunham or Greta Gerwig.

I'd spent my senior year interning for a major producer from Lionsgate, reading incoming scripts and providing coverage on them. I found the whole thing exhilarating and knew I was going to make a career out of it. Then I arrived in New York and had my first job interview. It turned out that an entry-level job in the entertainment industry paid less than at most fast food chains.

Hollywood was essentially made of money. Where was it all going? I guess when Leonardo DiCaprio gets a salary of thirty million, it doesn't leave much for the people behind the camera. In the end, they went with a more experienced production assistant, anyway.

I decided to meet the job market halfway and apply for a temp job at a PR firm. It paid more—not much more, but perhaps enough to get by—and it had a creative component even if it wasn't necessarily the one I'd been seeking.

Then my student loan began rearing its ugly head, and I realized even the PR job wasn't going to cut it. I was making \$1,450 a month—just enough to cover food, rent, subway fare, and, most importantly, eyebrow threading. Then the loan notice came, and I realized that, even if I stopped eating, walked to work, and crafted my own brows, I couldn't even cover half of it. Quick math told me I'd need to take home \$2,500. I was terrified.

Then I found out that working for the wealthy allowed me to avoid the low entry-level salaries of professional careers, and I jumped at the opportunity.

Being a nanny was the last job I wanted, but necessity outweighed pride, and so here I am. Once, a first-generation college student and, now, just a toddler's personal assistant.

Somewhere around 73rd Street Ruby asks if we can stop for ice cream.

“What kind?” I ask.

“Mint chocolate chip.”

It is what she always chooses, though it is, in my opinion, the worst of the flavors. Her mother seldom objects to treats and always leaves cash for random indulgences. In my childhood, ice cream was a rare luxury. It was an outing we couldn't often afford, but there were exceptions.

My father, separated from my mother at the time, had my sisters and me on Fridays, which also happened to be payday at the mill, where he worked as a mechanic.

“You have five dollars apiece,” my father would tell us as we walked into Walmart. It felt like the shopping spree of a lifetime. I typically left with something useless, like press-on nails or a pack of fifteen ChapSticks. We'd end the evening by stopping at the ice cream shop down the road. My father would pull out an envelope of twenties from the check he had cashed at the bank, and we'd all pick cookie dough. Now *that* was a flavor worth ordering.

But unlike me, Ruby has ice cream nearly every day in the warm months. Today we spend her after-school hours running through the grass of Central Park and watching boats row around the Loeb. I watch as tourists snap photos and, because New York is still so fresh to me, I can't believe I am more than just a visitor. On the short walk home, Ruby spots the strategically parked ice cream truck and screeches with excitement. I'm grabbing a handful of napkins when my phone buzzes. Ruby is bouncing far ahead of me, and I pull the phone from my back pocket as I call out, “Ruby, hold on!”

I glance at the screen and see a text from Hope. I open the message, irritated, but knowing my mother will continue to text me until I answer. She is nothing if not persistent.

Dad took apart bathroom so we could remodel but we don't have enough for a new toilet. Can we borrow two hundred? It's annoying to go outside.

I sigh and slide the phone away as the doorman opens the door for Ruby and me. We enter the dimly lit foyer and, while we wait for the elevator, I watch as a candle flickers against a gold-framed painting. The painting isn't actually all that good, but it is framed nicely and has somehow found itself a spot in this exclusive dwelling. *We have a lot in common, this painting and me.*

In many ways I have outdone myself, that much I know. I've clawed my way out of a chaotic childhood. My mother's text, short as it is, opens a floodgate of memories that I've worked hard to lock away. It reminds me of the child I once was and of the life I have come from, growing up in a rundown apartment with young parents who had too little maturity and too much responsibility. I had no nanny or babysitter, only a grandmother who managed to care for me and her ailing father simultaneously. My clothes and shoes were purchased from Kmart only after they spent months collecting dust on a layaway shelf.

Our family, me included, was very much into screaming and used profanities loosely. I was three the first time I flicked my mother off. There's even a photograph to prove it.

With Ruby, I eat gourmet sandwiches from Dean & DeLuca and take Ubers across town to celebrated museums. My own childhood was calls from debt collectors, pets that never lasted more than a few months, and strict portion control that often sent my sisters and me to bed hungry.

The fact that I somehow ended up in this place—with this job—is hard for me to comprehend.

The elevator whisks us to the sixth floor, and Ruby enters the apartment, calling out for her mother. Sasha hurries down the hall, her delicate flats making hardly any noise at all.

“Coming,” she assures Ruby.

Sasha pulls her daughter into an adoring hug before asking her about her day. It's strange, constantly witnessing a family's most intimate moments, and the scene often makes me long for moments in my own life that do not exist. I shake away the thought and try to convince myself I wouldn't have enjoyed such a tender exchange anyway.

In the world of Upper East Side mothers, Sasha is an anomaly. She is attractive, bright, and, at only thirty-five, exceptionally wealthy. Her parents went to Yale, as did she, as did her husband. I'm sure even her Havanese would have been accepted, had the little mop applied. Sasha does not work but is on the board of more fundraising committees than I knew existed. It's all part of a strange phenomenon on the Upper East Side, where women of great means spend decades preparing to attend prestigious schools like Princeton and Stanford, only to obtain degrees they never apply to a career. For these women education is not an economic necessity, it's a social status. The working mom is a rarity—and, in many instances, the least respected on the totem pole of motherhood.

Sasha's resume, combined with her family's name recognition, gives her a social currency most will never attain, but while I observe other moms gossip relentlessly, Sasha politely says hello to me and then promptly focuses her attention on her children.

The question of what it means to be a “good” mother has been top of mind since I took this job. It seems that the idea of women being able to have it all is still just that: an idea. I see all kinds of mothers in my day-to-day: working moms who have important jobs with impressive salaries and helicopter moms who obsess over every detail of their newborns' feeding schedules. But I have yet to discover the secret to raising a well-adjusted child, and I certainly haven't met an ideal mother.

Sasha is close, though. She adores motherhood and dedicates herself to it selflessly. Her only questionable parenting decision seems to be hiring me, a lost, self-loathing twenty-two-year-old, to help raise her children.

I'm unpacking Ruby's school bag when I decide that I'll lend my parents money for another toilet. My dad will pay me back, and this is the sort of favor one can't really refuse. Their home is no longer mine, so I won't have to use this new toilet, which is comforting because their bathroom never contained hand soap, and all the towels were filled with holes.

If I need to pee, there is a bathroom on Fifth Avenue waiting for me. It has floor-to-ceiling mirrors, jet-black marble, luxurious hand lotion, and an impeccable maid from Ecuador who folds the Charmin into tiny triangles and who keeps the toilet bowl perfectly sterile.

2 **The Toddler Keeper**

Whenever someone asks how I became a nanny, I tell them the truth: that it was a complete and tragic accident. It was early fall when I miraculously landed myself an interview, weaseled my way past a white-gloved doorman, and unknowingly changed the entire course of my twenties.

“Hunter goes down for a nap around ten, and he usually sleeps until twelve or so. I’ll write it down before you start on Monday, of course. He could sleep more or less, but what’s most important is what time you get him down. Consistency is key.”

I am following Sasha around her five-million-dollar apartment as she says this. I was hired to be their nanny about five minutes ago, and we’re now ninety seconds into a house tour, but I’m finding it difficult to focus. My experience with children doesn’t go much further than being an occasional datenight sitter, and I’ve just been given a job title that I’m both relieved and mortified by.

At the PR firm I’d watched the executives arrive in their suits, carrying green juices, and I’d wonder if I too could build a career there. But unlike the executives, I was taking home \$408 a week and I needed something that paid more, not in ten years after I’d paid my dues, but right then. At twenty-two, and regardless of my income, the federal government expected a thousand-dollar monthly check from me later that month. I was every millennial you’ve ever met. And I was in a real bind. It was my best friend who came up with the genius plan.

“Babysit?” I asked, confused.

Lila and I were sitting at our kitchen table—all the doors locked and deadbolted. We had been inseparable for nearly a decade but had only lived together for two months and were still afraid of our new surroundings. On the first night in our New York apartment, we heard a series of pops from our balcony on 101st Street. We joked nervously that they were gunshots but eventually convinced ourselves it was fireworks. A few minutes later we heard the sirens.

“You babysat in college. Why not just do that for a while?” Lila was referring to Saturday night gigs when I was out of dining hall points and desperate for cash to get me through. I have no interest in babysitting, but the alternative is leaving New York, just like my parents said I’d have to. And the only thing worse than changing diapers would be telling them they were right.

“Do you have any idea how expensive New York City is?” my father asked when I told him my plan to move there.

We were standing over the hood of my car, dead on the side of the highway. He was messing around with the engine, trying to get it running again. I sat inside, leaning out

the window, fist around the butter knife he'd taught me to hot-wire it with after I'd lost the keys too many times.

Periodically, he waved at me to give it a rev, and in between, we argued. "Do you?" I shot back. "You've been to seven states in your whole life."

"All right, dumb ass. You go to the dirty, crime-filled city, where everyone gets mugged and writes sad poetry about it in Starbucks and try, with the other billion people there, to find a place to work." He shrugged. "You won't make it. There are no jobs out there right now." "You don't know anything," I said. "No, kid. You don't know anything." Both of us were right.

Lila's suggestion piqued my interest enough for me to pursue it. I figured babysitting would supplement my PR income. I had no idea how lucrative the nanny industry could be.

Sasha has offered me more than double what I am currently making, and my head is spinning as I try to follow along with the crucial details of her family's hyperscheduled, organized life. In the coming weeks I'll need to be aware of Hunter's dairy intolerance and Ruby's weekly lunch playdates. It is important that I remember what pediatrician they see and the names of the family's housekeepers and doormen. But in the foyer is a fifty-thousand-dollar painting, and instead of giving Sasha my full attention, I am busy wondering if I have ever seen it in the MOMA.

"This is Ruby's room," Sasha says as I trail behind her.

I reach out to touch the velvety flowered wallpaper that wraps the room like a tightly bound present. In the corner is a small white bed covered in stuffed animals and dolls, cashmere blankets, and fluffy pillows. Bookcases packed with children's classics cling to corners but are partially hidden by toys and a custom-made dollhouse—everything a kid could ever want all in one place. Ruby's bedroom, along with its en suite bathroom, is larger than most studio apartments. It is spacious, polished, and pristine, but it's also cozy. The perfection is mesmerizing.

"Oh, and these are all labeled," Sasha says while balancing a drowsy Hunter on one hip.

She points to shiny bins and explains what should go where. The labels say things like *Art Supplies*, *Doll Accessories*, and *Musical Instruments*. There are kid-sized electric cars and scooters, bowling sets, and a stuffed dog bigger than the child herself. Sasha apologizes for her tendency to over organize.

"No, that's great. I hope some of your organizational skills wear off on me," I say, laughing. But it's not funny, because they never will, and five years from this moment, I will still be "misplacing" my debit card every other week.

Sasha continues with details and explanations as I glance over at Ruby, who is pouring fake cups of hot tea around a child-sized table. The teapot is dainty and beautiful and looks like real porcelain. Even in the private moment of pretend play, Ruby's manners are exemplary.

“Would you like a cup of tea, Barbie?” she asks.

“Yes, please,” she responds in a deeper voice.

Ruby’s long brown hair rests against a dark wool sweater. When a piece falls in front of her face, she flicks it away. She looks like the subject of a magnificent painting, a gorgeous child in an exquisite space. I’m hoping my expression doesn’t expose the awe I’m feeling, but I can’t help being stunned by Sasha’s home. Not just by the obvious wealth but, oddly, by its warmth. I wonder what it must feel like to grow up here.

“Stephanie?” When Sasha calls my name, I snap back to reality.

“Yes, sorry,” I smile. “I missed that last part.”

“I just asked if you had any other questions.”

The truth is I have so many questions. *What’s it like to reside on the most prestigious street in the world? To never budget or be restricted to the clearance rack? How does it feel to have such a beautiful family and peaceful home and to be able to walk into a store and never want for anything? The ability to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone? I can’t imagine it, but I feel no jealousy. Only a burning desire to be just like them.*

Of course, I say none of these things, for that would be extremely inappropriate, and it’s then that Ruby interrupts.

“Stephanie, do you want to hear what my piano teacher taught me?” “Definitely,” I say, and she leads the way.

In the less formal of two living rooms lives a grand piano. Ruby sits with perfect posture and a wide smile, a sleek Yamaha positioned among antique furniture, and I think to myself that one shot of this scene would be too elegant for even a Pottery Barn catalog.

I’m intrigued by this child, by her talents, interests, and manners. It’s become clear in our brief time together today that Ruby is the sort of child expecting parents dream of. I find that I’m not just charmed by Ruby’s life: I’m charmed by her.

“You’re getting really good, Ruby,” Sasha tells her. “If you keep practicing, you’ll be able to play the whole song in no time. I’m sure of it.”

Ruby shuffles through a songbook. I don’t know what the notes on the page mean, and I’m not convinced that she does either. Sasha’s daughter blushes, takes a breath, then her hands begin to work. The song is butchered, years from perfection, and her fingers and mind struggle to stay in sync. But Ruby has resources and limitless encouragement. There is no doubt that she will eventually play the song in its entirety. I think back to myself at that age with regret. Who would I have turned out to be if I had what Ruby has? Intellectually, emotionally, socially, she is so far ahead of where I had been.

“We’ll see you Monday, then,” Sasha says as I leave later that day. “The kids really seem to like you; it should be an easy transition.” “Awesome. Yeah, I’m really excited.”

But that's the thing about kids. Rich, poor, smart, fresh, happy, angry, it doesn't matter.
Children are universally difficult.

3 Flip-Flop

“THAT’S NOT RIGHT,” Ruby explodes.

“Okay, okay, no problem,” I say.

Ruby, typically angelic, is irate with me.

We are smack in the middle of our favorite pastime of transforming the kitchen into an art studio. We have every art supply in the house out (which is a lot considering Sasha keeps practically an entire Michael’s craft store in the front hall closet). The table is littered with markers and paints, the floor covered in poster-size coloring sheets. There is confetti everywhere, including in my hair. Ruby has just finished bejeweling a cardboard princess crown when she asks me to make her a pair of flip-flops out of paper. I have no idea that this is something she and Sasha have done many times before and therefore have no way of anticipating the very specific vision Ruby has in mind.

“No, no, no. That’s not right either,” she moans after I show her an updated pair. She stands abruptly, belting, “MOMMMMMMMMMY!” before sprinting away in hysterics.

I look down at the makeshift footwear. A flimsy piece of tape holds one shoe together. It lets go suddenly, causing the whole thing to fall apart. It is not entirely lost on me why Ruby considers this a job *not* well done.

A moment later Sasha leads a sniffling Ruby back into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” I say sheepishly. “I’m not sure how she wants me to make them.”

“Of course you’re not,” Sasha says, shooting me a sympathetic smile. “Ruby, Stephanie has never made flip-flops with you before. Do you know what that means?”

Ruby flicks a tear away and shakes her head no.

“It means that when someone isn’t sure about something you want from them you have to use your words, be patient, and show them how it’s done. Otherwise, you will hurt their feelings and they might not want to do a project with you next time. Okay?”

Sasha spends the next few minutes demonstrating how to create the flip-flops correctly. Once the shoes are done, she hands them to Ruby, who puts them on happily.

“I’m sorry, Stephanie,” Ruby says. “Next time I will have more patty-tents.”

“Patience,” Sasha corrects, but Ruby is already out of the room and off to locate her favorite Rapunzel dress.

Sasha looks at the clock. “You can head out, Stephanie. It’s almost six anyway.”

“Okay, great. I’ll just clean up, then I’ll go.”

Sasha always says not to worry about the mess, but I insist. At playdates, I often observe other moms giving their nannies outrageous directions. One nanny has to disinfect every toy that’s been touched, down to each individual building block. I heard another describe her end-of-day routine and how she can’t leave until she checks every hand soap dispenser in the house to make sure it’s completely full. If it’s not, she’ll need to add just a touch