

## THE LIVE-IN

By Nicole Ballard

*Note from the author: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

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1. WHO'S IN CHARGE	1
2. HOME FREE	12
3. INTRO TO (HELLER) PSYCH	27
4. BRAVE NEW WORLD	41
5. IN THE HOT SEAT	60
6. SYSTEMS DOWN	77
7. PASS THE TORCH	95
8. TOP OF THE WORLD	106
9. RIDE OR DIE	124
10. THE HEAT IS ON	135
11. GRATE ON MY NERVES	148
12. HELL FREEZES OVER	161
13. HOUSE OF CARDS	172
14. THE BAT-SHIT PROFESSOR	181
15. BLOW OUT THE CANDLES	196
16. SOUND THE ALARM	213
17. AGAINST THE CLOCK	230
18. LIFE OF THE PARTY	240
19. ALL DRESSED UP, NOWHERE TO GO	263
20. BEWITCHED	279
21. BETTER IN PAIRS	283
22. DOUBLE FEATURE	296
23. CLEARED FOR TAKE-OFF	314
24. RED-EYE	327
25. TALL GLASS OF WATER	347
26. EAT YOUR VEGGIES	364
27. THE OTHER SHOE TO DROP	381
28. SECRETS, SECRETS ARE NO FUN	392
29. BURNT OUT	408
30. FIRED	430
31. CAPS OFF	436

## 1. WHO'S IN CHARGE

Some part of my subconscious knew better than to let me dream through the feeling of being watched. I pushed my sleep mask to my forehead. A dim hall light stretched through the transom over my bedroom door, two figures backlit on the foot of my bed.

“Good, we were hoping you’d still be awake,” a deep voice shook the silence. Mere hours into our nanny-parent relationship and Damien Heller’s professional boundaries were already blurred. I thought my basement bedroom was sufficiently separate from the family’s, at least a nod toward work-life balance, but I was clearly mistaken.

“I’m not tired. I wanna make a cake with you,” spoke the small silhouette of 5-year-old Tabitha.

I tapped my watch and it glowed green. *10:35pm*. I hadn’t even been asleep long enough to call it a power nap. In any reasonable household, the parents would tell her it’s bedtime or that the nanny is off duty. The realization that this was not a reasonable household would come to me in drips and drabs, continually suppressed by my undying optimism and masochistic addiction to fixing everything that wasn’t my business. And by the time I understood the depths of it, it would be much too late.

*Well, fuck, I thought. Nothing in the secret For-Nannies-By-Nannies Heller Guide prepared me for any of this.* All those pages and no mention.

Straightening myself in bed, I fought to maintain some semblance of professional air.

“I actually just fell asleep. Can I bake a cake with you tomorrow?”

“*Allison,*” she whined. “I wanna bake *nowwww*.”

“She’s just discovered a trove of cake recipes. It’s a prime opportunity to practice math by doubling a recipe,” Damien said with an undercurrent of “*isn’t she precious?*” “If you weren’t awake, we wouldn’t ask, but since you’re up, why don’t you come upstairs?”

I didn’t have time to consent before Tabitha tore the sleep mask from my forehead. Her tiny hand was surprisingly strong as she dragged me upstairs by the ring finger into the fully illuminated kitchen.

A window at the top of the steps let in an April breeze that hit my nipples, making me keenly aware of how commando I was beneath what my mom and I dubbed my “business pajamas” —a button-down collared shirt and drawstring pants in navy blue cotton. I bought them to have something more professional to wear in the seemingly unlikely case I’d need to interact with my tech billionaire bosses after hours.

Their lake-front Tahoe cabin had been designed with stunning attention to detail. The kitchen was the pinnacle: wide-plank hardwood floors spanned the expanse, upon

which sat stately cabinets that wrapped around a massive center island. A lustrous tile backsplash met the marble countertop in clean angles.

My interior-designer mother was anxiously awaiting photos. “*For design inspo,*” she claimed, but I knew she just needed confirmation I was freed from that dumpster fire of a grad school apartment I left that morning.

“I want the cake double tall!” Tabitha insisted, handing me her MacBook Air. It was decorated in colorful permanent marker scribbles across both the case and screen, because in the Heller’s house, no expression of “inner artistry” was off-limits. She navigated her browser to a recipe called “Shag Cake.”

The cake itself was simple enough, but the decoration was highly involved, requiring grass pastry tips to pipe shaggy frosting in vibrant colors. Scanning the recipe for hope, I found the words: “Allow cake to fully cool overnight before decorating.” My blood pressure lowered slightly.

*Fucked up, but doable. We’ll set some boundaries in the morning and this will never happen again.*

Tabitha withdrew four cake pans but dropped them in a cacophony of clanging metal. A moment later, her two-year-old sister, Bixie, emerged looking like a Victorian apparition in her white lace nightgown.

“Mama says me come too,” Bixie announced.

She was followed by her mother, Sylvia, both of whom were already sporting blonde bedheads (Sylvia’s matted

with dark, greasy roots). Supposedly, Sylvia had given her blessing for this impromptu insomniac bake-fest, but by the way her eyelids hung just slightly ajar, it didn't look entirely consensual. The parents swiveled into leather barstools and poured themselves deep glasses of 1995 Abreu Cabernet Sauvignon. Aged to perfection to be consumed for absolutely no occasion at all.

I was sounding off the ingredients when Damien interrupted, "let Tabitha read them. I expect you to not miss these prime opportunities for education, Allison Waters."

*It's 11:05. Any prime opportunity for educating an almost-kindergartener has long since passed, I chose not to say.*

"Of course," I replied.

Reading at a painstaking pace, Tabitha tripped over short words like "flour," not to mention "confectioners" and "granulated." I gave her time to sound them out, lest I miss a *prime opportunity*. I retrieved paper and a pencil for her to double the recipe, and she stacked the basic equations in a crude, oversized scrawl.

Bixie impatiently pounded on the countertop, and I knew if we couldn't expedite this process, she and I would probably both have complete melt-downs. I discreetly helped Tabitha solve the problems as Damien refilled their glasses.

The girls took inordinate amounts of time to measure each ingredient, then naturally, dumped them just shy of the bowl. I hastily attempted to crack the eggs before anyone

noticed, but Tabitha caught me and I was supplanted. She missed the bowl with the first egg, and I watched as it slid pathetically down the side of the copper pro-series KitchenAid mixer as if it, too, wished to escape this failure of an evening. The second was contaminated with so much shell it had hardly been worth the trouble to crack it. I fished the bulk of it out but left the smaller fragments as evidence that the cake was baked by small children.

While greasing the pans, I looked on as the girls dipped their hands into the batter and licked them grotesquely from palm to fingertips in long drags. I expected an immediate response from the parents, but they watched this unfold apathetically. Adding that to the list of behaviors to fix for a later day, I pressed on.

“Let’s get these cakes into the oven and wash you two up,” I announced.

While they splashed with unscented Castile soap in the copper farmhouse sink, I divided the mixture amongst the cake pans.

“What time is it?” Damien demanded urgently.

“11:37,” I replied.

Damien’s expression turned upside down in a way I didn’t know the human face could contort. The far ends of his white eyebrows shot up toward his nonexistent hairline, creating sharp angles that pointed at the inner corners of his eyes, now squinting. His lips pressed inward and lowered menacingly.

“That’s incredibly irresponsible of you, Ms. Waters.” He spoke slowly in a tone surprisingly deep for his slight stature. My eyes widened, pulse escalating as fight or flight took over. “Tabitha has tennis at *nine* in the morning. Did you not think of this when you started the baking activity so late?” He paused as if this was not a rhetorical question. I stammered but was too frozen to utter anything worthwhile. “I expect you will structure the girls' time better in the future so her other activities will not suffer.”

He stormed at the pans and flipped the batter into the sink. The girls burst into sobs of betrayal. I looked between the four Hellers, stunned.

“We don’t eat cake in this household. It’s just sugar,” Damien huffed.

“Time for bed, girls,” Sylvia muttered uselessly through wine-stained teeth.

“We’re not tired,” Tabitha stomped.

“Yeah, we’re not tired!” Bixie echoed, drying the tears with her sleeve in anticipation of a rousing game of Stay Awake.

“Allison?” Sylvia pleaded for back-up.

This was my chance. *I can’t fix everything right now, but I can get everyone to bed.* Wiping my sweaty palms on my pajamas, I steadied my breath and put on my nanny game-face. If I played my cards right, I could be under the covers of my featherbed (the first perk of living in a billionaire’s house) and dreaming by midnight.

“Tabitha and Bixie, look at me.” I crouched to their eye level and held their tiny play-dough hands. “When we stay up too late, it makes us unhappy in the morning. It was fun to get to know each other a little more after bedtime, but it’s time for all of us to sleep so we can have a good day tomorrow.”

Tabitha scowled and yanked her hand from mine. She swiveled to wrap her arms around her stern father and looked up at him with pleading eyes.

“Dadaaaa,” Tabitha pouted, “I want to stay up and have chocolate covered strawberries with you.”

I suppressed an enormous eye roll, but to my astonishment, Damien melted like butter.

“We’re raising children with very sophisticated palates,” he boasted.

I returned his smile, until I realized he was quite serious.

“It’s so late for all that,” Sylvia attempted.

*Come on, Sylvia, you gotta be stronger.*

“If you give us chocolate strawberries, we’ll go to sleep. That’s the deal, you fucker,” Tabitha announced, regurgitating the words that made her father sound so important on his Zoom business deals.

“No. Bedtime,” Sylvia said firmly. It was such a relief to see her stand her ground.

“It’s low sugar!” Tabitha shouted.

“Choc'ate berry!” Bixie ordered.

When Tabitha realized she wasn't being granted her request, she got more desperate. She folded her arms indignantly. "Don't make me cross!"

Damien and Sylvia exchanged defeated glances.

"Fine," Sylvia heaved, gesturing apathetically to the pantry. "Allison? Fondue chocolate is in there, double boiler's to the left of the sink."

*For fucks sake.* I looked to Damien, praying he'd be a voice of reason, but he was already horizontal on a nearby sofa. I soon found myself rinsing gumdrop-sized farmstand strawberries by the handful.

*I could have just said "no,"* I thought futilely, as if I ever said "no." It was either the best or the worst thing about me, depending on who you asked. My mom had far more concerns about it than my professors, and people-pleasing seemed to have served me well so far. The Hellers could have asked me to prance on my hind legs for a treat and I would have complied, tongue lolling.

"Yummy! Yummy!" the girls chanted with delight as they galloped around the island.

I set a chinoiserie plate of dipped berries on something that looked more like a cross section of a redwood than a coffee table. I watched in sheer bewilderment as the girls grabbed them up by the handful, and flung them at their snoring father.

"Girls!" I scolded. "There is no throwing food."

"Yeah there is," Tabitha smiled.

"We actually," Sylvia admitted, "don't have rules."

I shouldn't have been surprised they were better practiced at training nannies than children. I'd been warned that they had fired 37 in the past year, most within days of arrival for offenses like singing *Baby Shark* or wearing perfume. And with a tightly controlled nanny, the parents could avoid ever having to discipline their kids.

But for as intensely uneven as the Heller-nanny power dynamic was, the relationship was surprisingly mirrored. Both parties used the other as a means to an end. And just like those 37 desperate young women before me fighting for a chance at a better financial future, the Hellers knew they had me by the balls.

What they didn't know was that I was unlike any nanny they'd ever met. Last year, my resilience was tested harder in a single day than some people experience in a lifetime, and it didn't sink me. So, I was fairly certain nothing could.

Damien groaned, still half-asleep, "alright, you got your berries. The deal was that you'd go to bed now. Allison, take Tabitha to brush her teeth and make sure Bixie pees."

"Come on, girls," I herded them past the massive family floor-bed comprised of two adjoined queen mattresses, and into the en suite. Scanning the vanity for another toothbrush, I saw only the frayed brush I'd used on Bixie earlier that evening.

"Where's your toothbrush?" I asked Tabitha.

"Right there, silly!" she said, pointing at the same red brush.

"Bixie said this was hers earlier."

“Mama, Dada, Bixie and me share,” she explained like I was the 5-year-old.

I threw up in my mouth a little and rummaged through the medicine cabinet. “You don’t have any other toothbrushes?”

“What’s taking so long? Toothbrush is on the sink!” Damien barked from the bedroom.

*More money than Jeff Bezos, and they can’t buy 3 more toothbrushes?* What they lacked in closeness with the children, they compensated for in bed and toothbrush sharing. I squeezed a dollop of the “Creme De Anise” toothpaste on The Brush, trying to ignore the \$23.49 price sticker on the back.

The parents were already dozing. Sylvia’s topless chest rose and fell, her breasts totally lopsided, like an arts and crafts project with mismatched googly-eyes. I made direct eye contact with them and they gave me the stink eye. I ushered the girls into the sea of white down pillows and duvets, where Bixie straddled her mom, and sucked Hefty Lefty into her mouth.

Backing up slowly, I groped for the bedroom light switch. *I’m free.* My featherbed was waiting for me, and I moved toward the stairs as if by magnetic pull.

My hand had just touched the railing when I heard Damien call out, “I expect there to be no trace of cake by morning!” *Right. That.* Then he added, “But clean silently! Do NOT wake us!”

Looking back, that probably would have been the nail in the coffin for a normal nanny on her first trial day. She'd have had her bags packed and been gone by daylight. But that's not me.

## 2. HOME FREE

I would have laughed in your face if you told me I'd graduate with my Masters of Education from Stanford just to be a live-in nanny. That January, I had nothing aside from some pending letters after my name, a Toyota Camry old enough to vote, and more competence with children than a seasoned parent. But it didn't matter, because I had just been awarded the only thing I'd ever wanted: an EducateAbroad Initiative (EAI) grant.

I'd hustled so hard for that future: applying for every merit scholarship, running English language after school programs, and sweating my summers as a camp counselor for dramatic, hormonal tweens. And so far at Stanford, the only moments I wasn't fighting to raise my GPA, I was mega-commuting to and from my apartment in Vallejo to soothe my flaming red bank account.

I wasn't the first in my lineage to grow up outside our community of Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, but being the first urban Indian in my family suited me. What did not suit me, however, was confining myself to a metal cage rolling through traffic for hours a day.

Finally, only one semester stood between me and my dream job teaching abroad with EAI. With the end of student debt accumulation on the horizon, I was ready to wean myself off the life of delayed gratification. Just

before the start of my last semester, I resolved to face the astronomical rent in Palo Alto. But, Facebook Marketplace seemed to have a better answer for me at 8457 Kendrick Ave. I can blame my near-pathological optimism for the fact that the \$350-monthly price tag just a few blocks from class didn't ring alarm bells. I even Venmo'd the first month's rent sight-unseen after a quick video meeting with the quiet red-head who was subletting the space.

She had quickly panned from the front door to the small kitchen, then whisking her phone down the hall, showed me to my side of the bedroom— a plastic lawn chair pushed up to a TV tray table, a black mini fridge, and a twin mattress on wooden pallets. The pixelated, weak connection on my tiny phone screen had consolidated my blissful ignorance.

*Nothing a cute houseplant can't liven up.*

When I arrived with my bag, I was almost knocked down by a hot, putrid gust that smacked me in the face as the door swung open, sending tumbleweeds of stringy hairs and dust rolling down the dark, narrow hall. The thermostat glowed green, proudly announcing its ability to keep the place at a sweltering 88°F. Stella Cass, or as I came to fondly refer to her in my mind, Smells-like Ass, met me at the door.

We passed the living room, which had been converted into a third bedroom by a make-shift wall of empty shoe boxes stacked like bricks. Rags and newspapers shoved in

every gap ensured there was absolutely no chance of light entering into the kitchen or hall.

Stella introduced me to the second roommate, Nataleigh. The first thing I noticed as Nataleigh peeked out on all fours from behind a pink baby blanket “door” duct taped to the boxes above, was the fact that she had definitely cut her own hair. That, or she had sawed it off with her pointed nails. She pressed on a tattoo of a keypad, squishing inked numbers into her forearm as if inputting a code beamed up to the mothership. She then retracted her lips in what I assumed was a sort of smile.

“Nice to meet you,” I managed.

There was a third roommate, ironically named Hope, who had a real bedroom to herself. I never saw her, not even once. I only knew she lived there because she was heard wailing for at least an hour a day. I would knock and call out to see if she was okay, and the sobs would pause just long enough for me to give up and leave, only for it to start all over again.

But the bathroom was possibly more objectionable than my roommates. When it was first built, it must have been white from floor to ceiling. But everything was tinged with years of soiling: gray tiles and black grout, yellow toilet bowl, brown smears on the walls, and green growths where the ceiling met the defunct ventilation fan.

There was no toilet paper when I moved in, so as a kind new-roommate gesture, I put a roll on the holder thinking they’d just run out. It vanished by the next morning, so I

put out another, and again, within hours— gone. I realized their toilet hygiene involved the little cups floating in tureens of standing water on the bathroom floor. While I never figured out why they couldn't co-exist with my toilet paper, I did get in the habit of carrying it to and from a storage box in my half of the closet labeled "LICE INFESTED RAGS - DO NOT OPEN."

The shower, as far as I was concerned, was completely unusable, and the lack of hot water was the least of my concerns. Its drain wore a thick, dark toupee, which efficiently blocked any way for the water to escape, leaving my feet to stew in the lukewarm bath of residual soap scum and hair (much of which clearly hadn't originated from anyone's head).

The kitchen was hopelessly irredeemable. I could barely stand to hold my breath as I passed it on the way in or out the door. The same dishes from the video call, fuzzy with mold, were piled high over the sink (that also didn't drain). But, oh my lord, the stench.

*This is worth it.* I mentally repeated my mantras on the walk back to the apartment each night after the library closed. *It's better than traffic at 5am. Saving money now means financial freedom later. It's temporary.*

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

"All settled in the new place?" I heard my mom's sweet voice on the other end of the line.

"I wouldn't say that exactly," I replied.

"Uh oh."

“It's so nasty, Mom.”

“Can you go back to your Vallejo place?” she asked.

“No, I let my lease go. And I'm *so* tired of commuting.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don't know, pray to go nose-blind? Stay at the library as much as possible?”

“There's got to be another place you can find, even if you have to spend a little more,” she suggested over the sound of dishes and running water in the background.

“It's only a couple months. I can handle it.”

“For someone who's so strong, I can't understand why you don't fight for a better life.”

“This *is* me fighting, but it doesn't matter anyway. My life hasn't started,” I replied.

“Alright, at this point, you could teach a course on living for the future. But honey, after the year we've had, you have to be kind to yourself.”

“I'm doing myself a huge favor by not taking out more loans,” I insisted, “and the sooner I pay off my loans, the sooner I can help you with your mortgage.”

“I love you so much, Honey, but that is *not* your job. Don't think of me as this poor widow who can't make it in the world alone.”

“I don't. I think of you as a widow whose late husband thought life insurance was tempting fate. Your financial situation is not your fault, and I'm going to do everything I can to fix it.”

“Gosh, you’re stubborn,” she said on a sigh, but I could hear that it came through a smile.

“I can’t let you lose the cabin, Mom. You’ve lost enough already.”

“Even if I do have to sell the house, maybe it’ll free me to follow you wherever you end up across the world.”

“Hey! Look at you finally accepting that your only child is destined to be an expat!”

“Never too late to change your mind,” she chuckled. “Please be careful. You don’t always have to handle everything. That’s what your dad did, and it might have been what killed him.”

“I’ve got this.”

“Alright, sweetheart. I’m headed to bed.”

“Right, it’s late over there. I love you,” I said.

“Love you, *goodnight*,” she crooned.

I spent as little time in the apartment as humanly possible. I felt more at home in the library than anywhere else, usually staying from class to closing. That didn’t bother me, I’d always felt at home in a library. My classmates let me shower and eat at their apartments, but since I hadn’t exactly cultivated a robust circle of friends during my semesters commuting from Vallejo, I was wary of overstaying my welcome. And, not willing to be “Thursday” in some guy’s week of swipe-and-forget encounters, I refused to face the gloomy dating app market just to escape my apartment for a night. When I did have to

eat at my place, I made grits with an electric kettle, subsisting off gruel like a Dickensian orphan.

I clung to the promise of EducateAbroad. The chance to satiate my raging wanderlust getting paid to change kids' futures felt almost too good to be true. I felt in my soul that the best part of my life was just ahead. Another couple months and I would be on a plane to Sri Lanka. A shitty apartment couldn't bring me down. After all, I pretty much just had to sleep there.



I pressed open the heavy glass doors of Moore Hall on my way to Childhood Across Cultures class. My footsteps echoed in the entrance as I passed a group of peers chatting outside the classroom door.

Lawrence, my only male classmate, looked up from his notecards in the front row and asked, “did you hear back from EAI?”

“I got the grant!” I bubbled.

“Girl! I knew you’d get it!” I met his outstretched hands for a double high five. “Where are you going and when!?”

“June 1st for a training in D.C. then Sri Lanka! What about you?”

“Alternate,” he grimaced.

“Ah, Lawrence! I’m sorry,” I said. “But there’s still hope!”

“No way, they never take anyone off the alternate list. You know EAI.”

“I say it’s not over until it’s over!” I gave his shoulder a squeeze and sunk into the folding seat beside him. Students crowded into the lecture hall all around us and unfurled desks from their armrests.

“It’s alright,” he sighed, “you’ve totally earned it. You’re the best student here. I’m happy for you!”

I was impressed he could be so upbeat. *I guess he doesn't need it like I do.* Getting the grant felt like all my aspirations were locked in, and nobody could take that from me.

Nothing about my post graduation plans had come to me by accident. If I were anything like the rest of my 46 hometown classmates from Minoshim, Michigan, I’d be working at Norris Logging and Lumber, probably still living with my parents, complaining about the snow but never moving south, griping about my wages but never job hunting, drinking too much, and just generally getting into everyone's business— like every Minoshim generation that came before. But all I'd ever wanted was to exist in a perpetual state of culture shock. To learn all the world could teach me. To get as far as I could from Minoshim and never look back.

“Thanks, Lawrence,” I smiled and took a breath. The more people I told, the more real it became.

Enormous coffee mug in one hand and a stack of red-penned exams in the other, our professor plodded in, her

paisley skirt skimming the floor. The buzz of conversation dwindled as she unfurled the projector screen. I took a notebook out of my tattered Jansport backpack that had carried my school supplies since 6th grade. As I scribbled “March 13th” a startling tone made me break the tip of my pencil.

“Attention Stanford students and faculty,” boomed the PA system. The room burst with chatter, but quickly hushed as the announcement proceeded. “Stanford facilities are temporarily evacuating due to the spreading global pandemic. Please make your way home immediately. Look for an email from Chancellor Masterson with further instructions.”



The next few weeks were a whirlwind of “further instructions,” first from Stanford’s chancellor, then from the government. It was pure chaos. My classmates left in droves to stay with their parents, but I wasn’t about to give up that easy and buy a one-way ticket to Michigan so close to my launch into the real world. Even if it meant being trapped with my roommates.

It was the first time I’d procrastinated on anything—waiting to see if it would all just blow over—until I realized the choice to jump ship wasn’t mine to make. We were urged to isolate and *flatten the curve*. I was to remain

at “home,” destined to sweat and regret every life choice that brought me to that apartment ad infinitum.

So, I embraced Homelessness Lite. I became a master of boiling eggs and potatoes in my electric kettle. Perfecting the art of the 60-second shower, I managed to scrub and rinse before the tub filled with pube soup. My basement-level window opened just enough for me to sip asphalt-scented air through the bars while I sat through Zoom classes.

Yet, even with the entire world locked down, not even the smallest fragment of my mind had considered that my EducateAbroad year was in jeopardy. When an EAI letter popped through the mail slot, I still expected it to detail my training schedule. If my mom hadn’t been on the phone to ground me in reality as I opened it, I might have believed it was just a nightmare.

“They withdrew all the grants.”

“Oh honey,” Mom whispered. “But you’ll be going next year when this is all passed?”

I read silently for a moment, then sighed gutturally, “No. They said they welcome my updated application in the next cycle.”

“They will,” she resolved. “You’ll get it again, just like you did this time.”

Nothing my mom could say would calm my inner turmoil. The all-nighters I spent studying, the hours I’d spent picking up the slack on group projects, the commute

that took years off my life, the fucking hole I lived in. It was all supposed to be the last push before my freedom.

I was utterly lost. I considered pivoting to a domestic teaching position, but postings were evaporating from job-hunt platforms as the uncertainty of virtual schooling halted hirings. By the end of March, I was willing to sell my soul to escape Stella and Company and to be able to afford fresh vegetables. *Cherry tomatoes*. I missed cherry tomatoes. I needed a job. *Any* job. My next step would not be the beginning of the career I had dreamed of, and I prepared to change course.



My plastic chair threatened to crack as I pulled up to my desk to dig into my lunchtime gruel. As I opened my laptop, the page refreshed with a new ad at the bottom. It read:

*Nanny & Butler*

*Bespoke Services*

Nanny & Butler was a posh agency representing a host of mega-elite with, “Maria will wash that for me,” and, “I need a bottle of Fiji Water right away,” at the tip of their tongues. I’d heard of celebrity nannies getting all kinds of perks alongside generous salaries, but had never once envisioned myself in that position. I forgot all about my mouthful of grits, fantasizing about tucking children with names like Summit and Onyx into bed, until a string of

drool dropped onto my hand. I swallowed and clicked the ad.

It opened in a new tab, revealing a page emblazoned with an ornate crown logo atop a photo of a home that blurred the line between luxury mansion and fairytale castle. I navigated to apply as a nanny candidate and began to input all my relevant data (including height, weight, and a full-body photo of myself, because body type was obviously an essential aspect of being a great caregiver.)

Within hours I received an email from one of their representatives whose zeal bordered on mania. She made it clear that my resume set me apart, and that families were desperate for more nannies now that schools were closed and camps weren't predicted to be open by summer. Yes, *more* nannies, to supplement their current nannies. Plural. But it was the last line that dilated my pupils.

*“Would you be willing to work on a yacht?”*

My eyes drifted across the screen to the folder that housed the most precious emails from Dad. The times he'd edited my college papers with the gentlest critiques. Articles that reminded him of me. Little notes of encouragement when I was lonely in Vallejo. And how proud he was that I chose meaningful work over financial opportunity, just as he had modeled all his life.

*Yacht. Is this selling out?*

With his goodness and honesty drained from the world, it felt like there was a cosmic void of kindness that only I could fill. Like thanklessly pouring my efforts into

bettering the world was the family business I'd apprenticed for. Nannying for the elite couldn't be farther from how I thought I'd be using my training. I tried to take a deep breath to clear my head, but it only filled it with the apartment's thick air.

*Yacht, penthouse, castle, I don't care. I gotta get out of here.*

I responded immediately and spent the rest of the day refreshing my email.



The next morning, my inbox erupted with interview offers. Since I couldn't rank the jobs in order of best behaved kids, largest nanny bedroom, or most tolerant of frozen dinners, I sorted them by pay and benefits. At the top of the list was the Heller family, coming in at double the average teacher salary with "negotiable extras" and "all living costs covered." The brief description read:

*"Live-in for two sweet girls of parents who both work long hours."*

Since I was mentally equipped to manage a classroom of 25 feral kindergarteners, I didn't bat an eye at two sweet girls. I wasn't keen on childrearing for absent ladies who would prefer to "lunch" than to spend time with their own offspring, so working for career-driven parents seemed entirely reasonable. They were living in their 12,000 square foot vacation home on Lake Tahoe, where they'd gone to

escape the confines of their \$17 million San Francisco penthouse.

Their need for a nanny was, “*extremely urgent*,” and we arranged for a phone call that afternoon. I’d expected to speak to one or both of the parents, but it was a young woman, Michelle, who introduced herself as the Heller girls’ nanny on the video call.

“I saw your profile on Nanny & Butler,” Michelle gushed, her mahogany eyes narrowing as a radiant smile spread across her face. A glorious crown of tight black curls framed her umber complexion. “You seem perfect, I’m really impressed by how aligned you are with the family’s needs. So, what’s important to you in a nanny job? You can be honest- what you say to me won’t get back to the parents.”

“I’m trying to get myself and my mom out of debt, so I’d like to take on a lot of hours at a good rate.”

“That’s perfect. Do you have student loans? We could definitely get them to pay those off if you commit to a year. Obviously, that would be on top of your pay and room & board. How many hours are you thinking?”

“I do, and I’m not sure, maybe sixty to eighty?”

“You should expect the upper end of that, maybe more.”

“I can handle that for a year,” I told myself aloud.

“Amazing,” Michelle bubbled. “Can you tell me more about how you fit what they’re looking for?”

“I’m really punctual and organized. I’m used to juggling a lot, so I don’t think there’s anything they can throw at me that I couldn’t take care of. And I play piano, if that helps.”

“This is perfect,” Michelle mumbled in the way one does while taking notes. “The girls’ parents aren’t musical at all, and Tabby’s learning viola, so I’m sure having a music background will help. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Are you stepping down from nannying?”

“I’m going back for my masters in psychology this fall, and Catherine, my co-nanny is starting law school. She’s been with the girls for a couple years already, so she’s ready to move on. We’re looking for a new head governess so I can do part-time. We’ll overlap a lot this summer, though, I’m sure!”

“How many nannies are there?”

“We try to maintain a minimum of two so nobody’s feeling too much pressure to keep them covered. But you’ll be their first live-in, so they’re excited about that!”

“How many nannies have the girls had since they were born?”

Michelle averted her eyes on a breathy chuckle. “It depends what you count as a nanny. I think there were 37 just last year. But I can tell you’re like Catherine and me—you’ll last, don’t worry. Let’s get you scheduled for a Zoom interview with Damien.” She didn’t give me a chance to consider why most nannies lasted under ten days as she

went on, “I’ll send you a detailed guide tonight so you can study up on the family before, but this all sounds perfect.”

Michelle referenced the Heller family’s calendar and scheduled the interview for 8:50 the following morning. The uber-specific interview time should have been the second red flag, but I was already running at full speed into Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ . Spoiler alert: I’m not magic.

## 2. INTRO TO (HELLER) PSYCH

*Allison,*

*FOR YOUR EYES ONLY. DO NOT share this or mention it to the family. It's just to help you succeed with the interview and the first days. Text me any questions anytime.*

*-Michelle*

When the email arrived in my inbox, I was so taken aback by her supportiveness, it felt like I should have been tearing wrapping paper off the PDF rather than clicking on it.

### NANNY GUIDE

Damien - "Dada" - 59 years old- created 8 huge tech companies for social media and eCommerce including Synaption and TranceAct.

Sylvia - "Mama" - Turns 50 this summer- fragrance chemist for that high end perfume company Elysian Cologne. She literally created the scent Rêve de Neuf with her bare hands.

Beatrix - "Bixie" (2.5) - Talk to her like an adult, the parents hate anything babyish.

Tabitha (5) - She doesn't like new people, so you're going to have to be clever to win her over quickly.

## WEEKDAY SAMPLE SCHEDULE:

### 8:00- BREAKFAST

Have all the following ready: eggs, bacon, bagel, oatmeal, and chocolate chip pancakes so they're hot right when they wake up. They like choices but can't wait for you to cook them. You can eat whatever they don't (when the parents and kids aren't looking) and throw the rest away (hide it under garbage in the trash or down the disposal). They hate food waste, but never eat leftovers. Tabitha takes milk with three drops of coffee in it.

### 9:00- Tabitha's TENNIS

Get her tennis gear ready before breakfast so you can dress her while they eat. The parents want Tabby's hair in pigtails (do it without her noticing because she will scream, and the parents hate to see her upset).

### 10:00- SCHOOL and/or MUSIC

Since preschool is canceled, you'll be responsible for "learning modules" and/or supervising music practice.

### 11:00- OUTDOORS

The parents want to SEE them playing outside early in the day. Play on the side of the yard their office windows face. Bring a snack because they're usually hungry.

### 12:00- LUNCH

They usually fill up on snacks, but offer them a meal that hits multiple food groups:

1. Boiled grain (farro, quinoa, AL DENTE pasta)
2. Steamed vegetable
3. Meat, usually duck breast (serve RARE, slice THIN), chicken or filet mignon (they call it steak).

1:00- ARABIC LESSON (ZOOM)

Both girls are expected to attend but Bixie is usually tired and ready for a nap at this point. Do your best to entertain her quietly while making it seem like she's learning Arabic.

2:00- BIXIE: NAP / Tabitha: MORE "SCHOOL"

Bixie can only nap while breastfeeding. Do everything you can to keep Bixie happy if Sylvia's not available to take her.

4:00- Tabitha's VIOLA LESSON

Zoom on weekdays, in-person on weekends

5:00- DINNER

Same as lunch.

6:00- MOVIE

This started when the parents had to keep them occupied at the start of lockdown, but now Tabitha demands it so they can't stop. Do NOT leave them unattended with a screen for even a moment.

7:00- BATH

Pour 2 cups of rolled oats into the tub for their skin. Clean them out of the tub after.

8:00- BEDTIME

If the parents aren't ready for them, stall for however long it takes. The girls will NOT sleep without their parents.

Other notes:

-ALWAYS put a visible amount of sunscreen on their face, even if you're only going out for a moment.

-Clean SILENTLY, they HATE the sound of cleaning

-Never clean when the girls are awake

-Plate their food beautifully

-Only classical music is allowed

-The girls love potty humor and it doesn't bother the parents

-The girls can create art with anything, never get in the way of something that could be seen as creative

-NEVER EVER let the girls interrupt their parents when they're working, ESPECIALLY when Sylvia is in a meeting

-Damien is EXTREMELY sensitive to smells. No perfumes, candles, scented cleaning products, laundry scents, etc. Poop in the nanny bathroom ONLY to contain the smell.

You'll do great! Xoxo

-Michelle

I froze when my eyes reached the bottom of the guide wondering if I should turn and run, or make flashcards. This job would be nothing like the babysitting families who used to say things like, *"don't burn the house down, we'll*

*see you around 10!”* as they backed out the door. I had a hunch the multi-page edict was just the tip of the iceberg, but I couldn’t help but rubberneck.

Water came to a rolling boil and my electric kettle clicked off. It released a puff of steam as I poured it over a bag of chamomile, the ritual of it pulling to mind images of nightly tea with my parents at our family cabin.

*The cabin.*

My mom should have been planning her retirement, not facing the loss of her home. But if everything Michelle said about compensation was true, a year with the Hellers would be enough to free my mom and me from debt. I know my dad would want me to take care of her, and the thought of letting him down was gut-wrenching. If this job was my chance to save the cabin, I’d be dammed if anything got in my way.

*It’s a fucking pandemic. What the hell else am I gonna do?*



I’d never been one to cut class, but in pandemic-world, it was easy enough to feign WiFi problems to get out of a Zoom lecture for my interview with Mr. Damien Heller. I tried to quell my pre-interview jitters with a glimpse at who would be interviewing me, which backfired terribly.

The Google Image results loaded in a formidable wall of photos documenting Damien shaking hands with

President Obama, sitting at a conference table with Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, and speaking at a major event with Andrew Kortina, Venmo's creator, among others. *He's just a normal dad*, I deluded myself.

My shoulder-length, deep brunette hair smelled like the hairspray I'd used to tame the wispy flyaways that were picked up with surprising detail by my laptop camera. I'd applied a touch of bronze eye-shadow to bring out the green in my hazel eyes. In an attempt at tasteful elegance, I dug up the faux pearl necklace my parents gave me for graduation and fastened it atop a modest lavender sweater. I didn't expect they'd be seen, but just in case, I was prepared with khakis that begged, "*allow me to uphold the country club's dress code while crawling under the table to retrieve your child's napkin.*"

I glanced at the clock in the top corner of my screen. 8:49. I initiated the meeting and positioned my face in a polite smile, anticipating my reflection to shrink down as his commanded the screen. I sat frozen as the clock passed 8:50, then 8:51. My smile began to wane. *Where is he?*

There was no mistaking the specific time, and I had triple checked the confirmation email from Nanny & Butler. *I'm cutting class for this. I studied for this!*

I stifled my indignation, remembering our videos could be joined at any second, but I couldn't stop my mind from wandering to the worst case scenarios.

*Did they fill the position with someone else overnight?  
What if they found a typo on my application and rejected  
it?*

I almost considered giving up and returning to lecture, but I didn't use up the last of my hairspray just to sit in class. My eyes glazed over as I resigned to wait it out.



After some time, I snapped out of my daze to see a face staring back at me.

“Allison?” it asked from behind thin lips under a bulbous nose and dark, beady eyes. He was leaning so close to the camera that his chin anchored the bottom of the screen and his shining, pale, bald head rested at the top.

“Oh, yes, hi!” I was obviously flustered. “It is I.”

*It is I? I cringed internally. How did I let myself zone out so hard I was shocked when the meeting actually started?*

“Alright then, let's begin.” Damien said, unamused. “I had a chance to review your resume and photo, and it was good.” He stared down at his lap and I couldn't tell if he was looking at my resume or my photo. “*Veeerrrry* good,” he continued, finally glancing up. “Tell me about yourself and where you're coming from.”

“Well, I'm finishing up my last year of my master's in education. I have extensive experience working with kids—babysitting, camp counseling, student teaching, and

running after school programs. Since the pandemic, job offerings for teachers are sparse and I can't financially afford to wait for positions to open back up."

"Ah. I understand. You know, I came from small beginnings myself." He shifted the conversation onto his favorite topic (himself).

"Really?" I encouraged. I braced for his rags to riches story.

"Yes, when I was a teenager, my father had to file for bankruptcy. It was quite shaking for our family. But, as you can see," his nose pointed at the corners of the room (that I definitely could not see because of the proximity of the camera to his wrinkled face), "I rose above it."

*Pretty sure only rich people file for bankruptcy.*

"Oh yes, so you absolutely understand," I commiserated.

"And what makes makes you passionate about nannying?" he inquired.

It was a standard question, but I was totally caught off guard. I'd rehearsed it a million times in my head, except with "teacher" swapped for "nanny."

"I feel passionate about nannying," I regurgitated like a well-trained pageant girl, "because teachers are spread too thin to get to know students on an individual level, whereas my connection with just two sweet girls can be much deeper." *Pulled that out of my ass.*

“So, I take it you’re not a career nanny,” he stated matter of factly. His expression didn’t give me a good read on how to reply. *I’m definitely not, but is that good or bad?*

“I suppose it’s possible I could find that nannyng is my true calling, but at this point in time, I plan to return to teaching when the timing is right.”

He nodded slightly with a frown of approval. The frown looked more at home on his face than the approval. “Good. We’re not interested in career nannies. We want our children to grow up exposed to driven career-women dedicated to excelling in their field of choice.”

*Field of choice- so long as that’s not nannyng.*

“Understood.”

A small girl with stick-straight blonde hair that hung around her ears crawled onto his lap and obscured the camera with her mauve tulle dress.

“Beatrix,” he cooed like he was greeting a long-lost friend.

She whispered in his ear inaudibly.

“Oh, is that so?” He had no intention of letting me in on their exchange. “What else?”

More inaudible whispers. Their back and forth went on for several minutes until I started to wonder if he even remembered why his laptop was in front of him. She eventually scampered away, and I watched every feature on his face drop an inch or two as he robotically shifted back into Business Mode.

“We’re looking for someone who can manage the household as well as the children. I’m keeping 8 companies afloat. I can’t be expected to keep track of filet mignon inventory. And we’ve canceled Harriet, the cleaning lady. She lives in a little apartment with a dozen family members and goes to one of those disgusting laundromats, so we just couldn’t trust her to not bring the virus to our house,” he said, vindicating himself as if their unmasked country club gatherings were risk-free. He went on, “so, you’ll be expected to keep the house clean.”

“I’m pretty meticulous, so that shouldn’t be a problem,” I assured him.

“Good. I’ll introduce you to the family.” He stood, carrying his laptop against his grey sweater at navel level. I heard a door slide open as shrill stringed-instrument noise flooded my headphones. He spun his laptop around to reveal a young girl, wearing a floor-length white lace gown and holding a viola. She looked like a tiny bride about to provide the accompaniment for her own procession.

“Tabitha, this woman is hoping to be your new nanny.”

*I have a name.*

Tabitha pursed her lips and turned her chin up and away from the screen. “I like Catherine,” she scowled at her father.

“Catherine is going to law school,” Damien reminded her. “But she’ll come back to nanny once she’s finished with school.”

Her mood abated on false promises.

“Hi, I’m Fei Bautista, Tabitha’s viola teacher.” A kind face bent down to wave at the screen.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Allison Waters. How long have —”.

“Show me what you’ve accomplished, Tabitha,” Damien interrupted. Tabitha repositioned herself at the music stand where Fei placed a hand on her back to cue proper playing posture. Tabitha played something that approximated Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star with a screeching, horror film twist.

Damien lectured, “did you know this melody was part of a set of variations composed by Mozart?”

*Did you know we’re in the middle of an interview?*

“That sounded lovely, Tabitha!” I grinned as sincerely as I could muster, and then prayed my cheerfulness didn’t reveal any sarcasm.

“Do not distract her,” Damien chided.

I kicked back in my chair to patiently watch my interview’s commercial break. I half expected a host to step into my screen announcing, “*coming up next, a toddler playing 18 holes golf! Watch it here, exclusively on Zoom!*”

The clock ticked by, and for 38 torturous minutes, I observed Tabitha’s viola lesson. Who knows how long they had been at it before Damien arrived, but as the half hour mark passed, Tabitha became increasingly hysterical. She finally exploded in a burst of blonde curls and hid under the piano, hugging her knees.

“Can you deal with her?” Damien barked at Fei. “If she doesn’t work for another hour before lunch, we won’t be able to stay on track with her daily minimum.” His 5-year-old’s meal breaks apparently hinged on meeting her lofty music practice quota. Damien pulled the door closed while holding the laptop camera under his chin at a highly unflattering angle.

“Sylvia is in meetings until 7:30 tonight, and you saw Bixie earlier, so that’s everyone,” Damien said nonchalantly, as if an entire viola lesson hadn’t abruptly sidetracked our interview.

“It was great to see Tabitha in her element. What made her choose viola?”

“I chose. It’s rare— looks good on a college resume. I’ll show you the nanny bedroom downstairs.”

Vibrant Spanish tile risers and oak treads rose behind him as his free hand grazed a wrought iron railing. He flipped the laptop to face out into a hallway with white stucco walls that refused to compete with terra cotta floors adorned with an incredibly long antique runner. This “basement” was nothing like the one I was sitting in on the other end of the call.

“That’s the girls’ art studio,” he explained, motioning toward one of the many arched doorways on either side. “And this would be yours.”

The high ceilings had dark log beams running perpendicular to floor-to-ceiling glass doors outlined with black trim. Through the doors, a jaw-dropping view of the

mountains around Lake Tahoe was partially veiled by olive green drapes. The queen-size bed was the crowning jewel of the room. Its linen frame was topped with layers of white pillows and comforters, throw pillows and woven blankets in earth tones, and flanked by wooden nightstands (which would have looked like dressers in proportion to my current apartment). Directly across from the bed lay a fireplace encased in a massive stucco surround that angled toward the ceiling. A black soapstone kitchenette beside a full-sized dining table sandwiched between wooden chairs and a built-in upholstered banquet completed the space.

“The en suite is over here.” He opened a door to a walk-in closet. “Oh, not that one.”

Behind the other door was a blinding sea of marble. I gawked at the glass-encased shower and wall-to-wall vanity. But my eyes fixed upon a large rattan basket mounted with toilet paper rolls. Greed took hold.

“It’s perfect!” I blurted. “What else would you like to know about me?”

“Michelle and I have gathered what we need from you. I’ll touch base with the agency for the next steps.” His face abruptly diminished into nothing, and I was left staring back at my own reflection. As far as he was concerned, any parting niceties were a waste of time. The top right corner of my screen read 11:11 AM. I made a wish.

### 3. BRAVE NEW WORLD

“*Can you start Saturday?*” read the subject line in the most recent email from Nanny & Butler. It was Thursday at 5pm. I hadn’t even received an offer letter, but with the urgency of the interviews, it wasn’t surprising they expected a quick turnaround. The email explained they had a “*gap in coverage*” that was “*extremely distressing*” to the parents.

They had scarcely been alone with their children since they were born: a slew of night nurses and newborn care specialists followed by an onslaught of nannies. During lockdown, the parents held Michelle hostage in their city apartment to ensure they would never be saddled with childcare. And after five years of parenting with near 24/7 assistance, their confidence in spending a weekend with their heirs was nil.

I had a few loose ends to tie up, but they gave me no pause to accept the job. Final exams had been converted to final papers when administration realized the likelihood of cheating was impossibly high, and I’d completed those as soon as the opportunity was presented. Just a 30-minute virtual counseling session with my loan advisor and I’d be an official graduate.

Packing wouldn’t take long; I had hardly any belongings to my name. The only issue was that the smell

of the apartment had seeped so deeply into my clothes, it was no longer removed by “*one of those disgusting laundromats,*” in Damien’s words. Everywhere I went, I carried a little Eau de Stella souvenir. If the scent of soap was prohibited at the Hellers, I couldn’t imagine he would tolerate my presence with putrid clothing.

I was prepared to blow all my savings on a utilitarian shopping spree knowing I would make it all back by the end of my first day of nannying. I needed clothes that looked like I could be trusted, were as glitter, food, and grass stain resistant as possible, and fit my restrictive budget. Since kids usually care about their nanny’s fashion choices about as much as they regard the crudité platter at a birthday party, I didn’t worry myself with how flattering they were.

A trip to Kohl’s on Friday morning secured my new wardrobe: several pairs of loose Bermuda shorts and pants, and a set of Croft & Barrow shirts with patterns that could only be described as Retirement Community Chic. I donated all my permanently scented objects to the Salvation Army, even retiring my Jansport backpack. My Camry got a well-earned spa day with interior detailing to thoroughly eradicate any lingering stink. With my Kohl’s haul packed into a brand new duffle, I hunkered in to spend one last afternoon in my apartment reviewing and internalizing the all-important Nanny Guide.

It had just reached full daylight by the time I coaxed my Band-Aid colored car into the driveway like I was begging it to do me one last favor.

*Come on. Make a good first impression.* It sputtered and shook in reply.

The driveway gate swung open automatically, revealing the Heller's spectacular "cabin." It made my family's Michigan cabin look like a birdhouse. Colossal log pillars rose from the ground before a limestone entry. Stacks of massive pine trunks joined at the corners formed the outer walls. My car groaned as I put it in park at the edge of the driveway

I banged my fist on the trunk twice to get it to open. Extracting my duffel, I swung it over my shoulder, straining to straighten myself. An excessively thin middle-aged woman dressed in white from head to toe came into view from behind the large glass door. Her stark appearance with sparse, platinum, box-dyed hair stood in contrast to the vibrant collection of graffiti-like figure outline paintings on the entry walls behind her.

"Hi. Sylvia." She extended her hand and raised the corners of her lips in a forced smile.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Allison Waters," I shook her hand and returned the smile.

"Thank God you're here," she sighed. "I've been on the girls all morning."

*It's 8:15am. I'd hardly consider that "all morning," but okay.*

"Happy to help," I said, combatting her level of desperation with equal and opposite enthusiasm. "What's the plan for the day?"

"Talk to Damien. I need to catch a meeting. See you in a bit."

She disappeared behind a corner. I stood alone in the entry, still holding my bag, using echolocation to determine which direction would lead me to the children. A telltale shriek rattled the house.

*That way.*

As I passed through the foyer I squinted at the signatures on the bottom of the paintings.

*Yep. Original Keith Harings.*

I wove my way through a massive sitting room and library before encountering the kitchen, which was mildly perfumed with an exotic aroma. Tabitha and Bixie were at the island encircled in glass spice jars with handwritten labels like "ORGANIC CARDAMOM" and "CRUSHED JUNIPER BERRIES." Lids were strewn about haphazardly.

I watched as Bixie picked up a jar labeled "SUMAC" and dumped half of the garnet powder into a large stainless steel mixing bowl. Tabitha tipped the jar of annatto upside down and shook it, grinning as it fell. Damien was at the kitchen table with his head buried in his laptop, either unaware or unperturbed by the goings on at the island.

“Hi girls!” I interrupted the mad scientists. They turned their heads to look for a moment, but quickly resumed their activity. Damien stood and closed his laptop.

“You’re finally here,” he grunted, smoothing his bushy eyebrows with his index finger and thumb.

*Thanks for leaving at 6am to get here so promptly, Allison,* I interpreted.

“Yep, I’ll just drop my bag in my roo—”

“I’m headed to my office,” Damien interrupted, pulling a USB from his computer and inserting it into a chain around his neck. “The girls are doing an experiment with spices. I think it’s important they have the freedom to explore different smells and tastes so they can develop a sophisticated palate. You can supervise that while you make breakfast.” He traversed the room with his laptop toward a staircase. “Fei will be here in an hour to teach viola. Tabitha should do at least three or four hours today, really as much as she’ll tolerate. Bixie should be engaged in educational activities during that time as well.” He was already climbing the steps. “They’ll get hungry for lunch at some point, and you can eat if you need to. Arabic Zoom at two for both girls. Zoom coding lesson at three and a four o’clock private tennis lesson at the club for Tabitha. Make sure they get creative time in the art studio. And they need to get outside while the weather holds.” Damien’s voice was getting more distant. “Dinner, bath, pajamas!” He called as an afterthought. I felt like a diner waitress taking an order for a hungry table of twelve.

*I guess that was my orientation.* I lowered my duffel with a thud.

“Hi girls! You can call me Allison. What do you want for breakfast?”

Bixie smiled sheepishly and ducked her face behind the mixing bowl but Tabitha continued stirring the spice concoction without looking up.

“Tabitha?” I asked again, now at the island and bent to their eye level.

“Coffee milk. And eggs,” Tabitha demanded without making eye contact.

“Okay, how do you like your eggs?”

“Like normal eggs,” Tabitha replied.

“Okay,” I said skeptically. “What do you think Bixie wants?”

“Choco’ chip pancake!” Bixie announced, popping her head up from behind the bowl.

“Sure.” I peeked into their bowl to find nearly two cups of earth-toned powder. “You can keep exploring, but try to use little amounts so we don’t waste too much.”

“This is how we mix potions. Dada says I can,” Tabitha retorted. My heart threatened to stopped as she unscrewed a lid and poured a one-ounce jar of saffron into the mixture. I didn’t get to go abroad, but I got culture shock nonetheless. The last time I even thought about saffron was eighth grade, when I chose a paella recipe to cook for World Day. My parents cringed at the ingredients list and steered me toward Mexican Rice.

*Not my saffron. Not my problem.* I redirected my focus on breakfast.

is there pancake mix? I texted Michelle.

Within seconds her reply popped up on my phone. They don't do mixes, everything is from scratch. You'll get used to the ratios without a recipe.

While whisking Tabitha's eggs, I quartered the first pancake recipe I found on Google. The gas range clicked as it lit blue rings under the frying pans. It was so satisfying to cook with fire after suffering through so many electric kettle meals.

Bixie grabbed a spoon from the utensil drawer and tried to fill it with water. The faucet sprayed in a 360 degree fountain, soaking a strip on the back of my hair.

"I'll wipe that up in a sec, be careful not to fall," I cautioned. *She's gonna fall*, I thought, abandoning the sizzling pancake batter and snatching a dishcloth.

Bixie hardly took a single step before landing face down, sending the spoon skidding across the floor. Sometime between my own clumsy childhood and now, I'd become one of those prescient adults who could predict kids' accident-prone futures.

I scooped up Bixie's little wet self, cupping her head as it rested on my shoulder. With no regard for her sister's wails, Tabitha grabbed the spoon and began stirring, adding a metal-on-metal scraping noise to the cacophony in the kitchen.

“Why is she crying?” Damien stormed down the stairs. Her cry was like a dog whistle; no matter how far he was, he could hear it above all else and would come running.

“She just slipped on the wet floor,” I answered, not feeling any urgency to defend myself.

“Why was the floor wet?” he demanded.

“She spilled some water from the sink, and I was just about to wipe it,” I explained, waving the dish towel in my hand.

He tore Bixie from me and rocked her in his arms like a baby. Her tears were dry within seconds and he set her down.

“She loves her daddy,” I bolstered his ego.

“She shouldn’t need me when you’re here. I expect you to take over childcare in my absence so I can focus.”

*We didn’t need you, I had it handled.* “I’m sure we’ll get to know each other over the next few days and I’ll be able to comfort them more quickly next time,” I assured him.

“There shouldn’t be a next time if you’re vigilant.” He eyed the smoking pancake then lasered the next comment directly into my pupils. “I have *nothing* to say about that.” And he retreated to his office.

*But clearly you do, because you just said something.* I flipped the pancake. *It’s dark, but it’s not charcoal.*

“This is your one minute warning before clean-up. In one minute we’ll put the spices away. Who wants to press the button on my watch to start the timer?”

“Me!” Tabitha piped.

They took the countdown as a challenge to frantically dump as much as they could into the bowl while I rushed to plate their breakfasts.

“Time’s up!” I said as the watch buzzed. “Cap the jars and put the big bowl in the sink, please. Would you like to eat breakfast at the island or the kitchen table?”

“Table. Read to us,” Tabitha replied.

“Sure, first clean up then you can each pick a book and bring it to the table.”

Do they have kid forks? I texted Michelle.

They don’t. They say child-size things promote immaturity she responded instantly.

I couldn’t blame the girls for not feeding themselves—the adult-sized forks were the length of their arms. Proportionally, I couldn’t imagine eating with a two-foot-long fork.

I set their plates before them.

“Honey too!” Bixie whined as she crawled into the gray upholstered dining chair, her eyes level with the plate.

“This isn’t eggs!” Tabitha sat beside her looking disgusted.

“I can get honey, but—” turning to Tabitha, I said, “what else would they be?”

“They’re supposed to have a yolk and a white. And salt.”

“Have you tried scrambled eggs like this?” I took a bite with her fork and sold them hard. “They’re so good! I can get salt for these, too.”

I returned with a massive jar of organic local apiary creamed honey and a container of fine sea salt.

“Here to dip.” Bixie pointed to her plate as and I spooned a little dollop of honey.

“Not that salt!” Tabitha sighed, all the exasperation of someone in line at the DMV. I was under the impression that salt was salt, but a 5-year-old was about to set me straight. She stomped toward the counter where a tiered tray held a cluttered assortment of nonperishables. She retrieved a ceramic salt cellar with a tiny wooden scoop. Inside were crystal flakes shaped like stepped pyramids the size of a pencil eraser. She sprinkled them on her palm and they landed pointed side up, like a miniature of the Giza necropolis. She wet her finger in her mouth, pressed it to the salt, and licked it off.

“You eat salt just like that?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s yummy. Try it!”

“No, thanks. How about let’s put it on your eggs?”

“How ‘bout you make eggs with a runny yolk,” she glowered.

“I’m not going to make other eggs until you’ve at least tried these, because you might like them,” I held firm.

She scowled at me with squinted eyes and sat silently for a moment.

“I’m telling Dada,” she resolved, her scowl transforming into a determined pout. She stomped in his direction. “DADA!!!”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I whispered, stumbling to get in front of her. “I’ll make eggs with the yolk. Sit with Bixie, please.” I put my hands on her shoulders and escorted her back to the table. *This ’ll be easy when I know what they like.*

As I removed the eggs from Tabitha’s sight, I noticed Bixie picking the chocolate chips out of her pancake. “Eat the pancake part too, or I won’t put chocolate chips in next time. Chocolate isn’t breakfast.”

“Yes! Choc’ate breakfast!” Bixie smirked.

I shot her the universal Don’t Test Me look, and while her bewildered eyes gave me the sense it was altogether unfamiliar, it worked. She took the pancake in her pudgy little hands and bit it like a sandwich, dotting melted chocolate like dimples.

I hastily made two emergency eggs and, despite being very out of practice, miraculously perfected their runny yolks on the first try. Tabitha pinched salt flakes onto each golden yolk. Just when I thought she’d dig in, she scowled.

*What now?*

“Where’s my coffee milk?” She wasn’t wondering, she was demanding.

“Oh, right,” I frantically glanced around for leftover coffee in the parents morning cups. “I don’t see any coffee. Could I just get you regular milk?”

“I want milk milk!” Bixie said, projecting her voice straight through her sinuses.

“You don’t have to whine, I can get it for you.”

Bixie stood on her chair to watch the milk as it was poured. “More!” she called.

“Sit, please. I can bring you more after you finish this.”

“More!” she shouted louder.

I filled the lowball tumbler just shy of the brim. *Heaven forbid she sic Dada on me.*

“Tabitha?” I prompted, hopeful she would have the same.

“Coffee milk.” She crossed her arms.

“Alright, be patient, I need to boil the water first.”

My brain is naturally too wired for caffeine, so at 24 years old, I had never actually made coffee. But three drops of bad coffee diluted in milk wouldn’t give me away. While the kettle heated, I sat between the girls and opened the yellow cover of a thick collection of Curious George stories.

Tabitha’s eggs were still untouched, so I popped the yolk and let the liquid gold flow into a spoon. I held it by her hand hoping she’d grasp it, but she instinctively opened her mouth. *She’s going to kindergarten at the end of the summer. Do they think I’m gonna spoon feed her in the cafeteria?*

“Read!” Tabitha huffed.

And before I knew it, I was a book-reading, bite-feeding, napkin-dabbing Nanny Machine.

“Stop that monkey!” My voice lowered to become the angry zookeeper pictured on a page of *Curious George*.

“I’d appreciate if you read books to them that will expand their minds,” Damien’s voice snuck up behind me.

*Where the hell did he come from?* I glanced down at the teeny tiny sock feet that carried him silently across the floor.

“I didn’t know. I just let them pick,” I said.

“Have Tabitha read it,” he snapped.

“I don’t mind reading— their mouths are full.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion. This is a prime opportunity for Tabitha to practice reading.”

“I’m eating!” Tabitha sputtered disdainfully.

“Read to them,” he insisted, peeking over Tabitha’s shoulder. “That’s not going to be enough eggs for her.”

“I can make her more if she finishes.”

“*Reeeaaaaad,*” Bixie pleaded.

*This whining has to stop.*

“The man...” Tabitha began, her words sticky with yolk, “with... the... yell-ow hat.” I winced as her gooey finger traced the words, finger-painting across the page.

I swiveled to get the whistling kettle, but Damien was already pouring it into a glass French press. He made his coffee and left the press behind, padding silently out of the room.

“Thanks for reading to us,” I encouraged as I got up from the table. I could put off learning to make coffee for

another day. Pushing hard on the handle eked out another half teaspoon of coffee and I tipped it gingerly.

*One. Two. Three drops. If I were a Starbucks barista, this would be an order for the break-time gossip.*

“Coffee milk,” I said as I placed the almond-toned beverage before Tabitha. I popped a square of egg white into her mouth. She protruded her tongue and let it fall to the plate with a look of disgust.

“I don’t eat the white.” She was thoroughly betrayed.

“You *what?*” I heard her words but it seemed impossible that she was accustomed to eating nothing but yolks for breakfast. She stuck her finger in the hardened yolk bottom and licked it innocently. *So that’s why he said it wouldn’t be enough eggs.* “Do... you want me to make more?”

“No. I’m having coffee milk.”

Bixie had bitten through to the center of her pancake, leaving a scalloped edge around the circumference where the chocolate chips were lacking. It sat rejected on her plate as she licked honey from her fingers. The only evidence of her having had a small sip of milk was a chocolatey residue on the rim.

“*Reeaaaaad!*” Bixie fussed, noticing the lull in entertainment.

“Are you going to have more milk? That’s a lot to waste.”

“I’m full,” she announced.

“Hello?” a small voice called. Fei’s familiar, smiling face showed up in the kitchen scarcely higher than the bottom of the upper cabinets. She wore a white blouse tucked in to black trousers and carried a navy viola case in one hand with a few books labeled “SUZUKI” in the other. The gray canvas backpack slung over one shoulder looked like it was going to burst at the seams. I had no idea what she was so prepared for, but she wasn’t taking any chances of being trapped at the Heller house without enough mystery items to weigh down her small frame.

“Hi! We’re just finishing up breakfast,” I replied.

“Great,” she smiled, “I’ll go set up in the music room.”

Tabitha gulped down her coffee milk and disappeared in a flash of pink, her silk nightgown trailing behind her. She crouched under the live-edge coffee table in the great room and hugged her knees.

“Tabitha, what’s goin’ on?” I called out. I poked my head under the coffee table. “I’m excited to hear you play viola!”

She spun to face away from me, still clutching her legs to her chest. Bixie crawled under to sit beside Tabitha.

“Fei is almost ready for you. Let’s wash hands and you can show me the music room.” *Nothing*. I needed to pull out the big guns. “I wonder what kind of soap you have in the bathroom. Is it lavender? Or maybe it’s... poop scented!”

Bixie beamed with gums where her canines would be.

“No,” Tabitha grumbled, but looking over her shoulder, her smile broke through pursed lips.

“Show me. I think you have poop soap,” I jabbed.

They erupted with laughter.

“Poop soap!” Bixie howled.

Tabitha sprung out from under the table and bolted toward the family bedroom. Bixie and I followed her into the bathroom en suite. She pumped the marble soap dispenser into her palm.

“See?” Tabitha held it to my nose to smell.

“I can only tell when it gets wet and sudsy,” I prompted.

She lathered up her hands under the running water.

“Now?” Tabitha asked.

I leaned down and sniffed deeply.

“Ahh. Yes. It doesn’t smell like anything at all. *Phew*. I was worried I had to live with two little girls with poop soap. What about you, Bixie? What does it smell like when you wash?”

“Poop!” Bixie shouted, taking her turn at the sink.

“How is that possible? Bixie’s *does* smell like poop. Oh, wait,” I sniffed my armpit. “That’s me!” They were hysterical. *Success*. Four hands that were no longer covered with breakfast and saliva.

“Let’s go find Fei so we can get started with lessons,” I announced.

Tabitha's scowl was becoming familiar. She crossed her arms. I dove under the covers of the side-by-side queen floor beds in response.

"Where are you, Fei!?" I shouted. "Oh no. I'm so lost. HELP!"

They yanked the covers off my head in one giggling heave.

"Thank you! Please help me find Fei, I'm just so lost," I gasped.

Bixie took the lead this time. Tabitha was on to me, but she was too caught up in the fun to resist. The three of us burst into the music room laughing.

Rich textiles on every soft surface and abstract artwork outlined in sleek metal frames adorned the space, lending themselves to a sophisticated and collected ambiance. The scent of burning wood emanated from a heap of smoldering ashes in the huge stone fireplace. The smile dropped off my face when I noticed Damien seated at a felt-top card table beside the rosewood Steinway piano (a \$100,000 beauty).

"My beautiful girls!" he softened. "What's so funny?"

"Allison!" Bixie credited.

"I see." Damien looked unconvinced that he should share their affection.

"Tabitha's fed, hands are washed, and she's ready for a great lesson." I put both hands on Tabitha's shoulders and presented her for inspection.

A bemused look crossed his face. "They're still in pajamas."

“Uh— yes?” I stammered.

He raised his eyebrows. *Was that a question?*

“We’d just finished eating when Fei got here, so I prioritized getting started with lessons right away. I can get them dressed now if you want.”

“A dress!” Bixie squealed and galloped off toward the bedroom.

“Do you want to waste Fei’s time?” Damien inquired, dripping with sarcasm.

I knew how to handle that kind of comment. It was just the deep-voice edition of the bullies I grew up with. And after years of practice, I’d mastered the kind of nonchalance necessary to disarm them.

“Of course not,” I answered with guiltless eyes.

“That’s okay,” Fei inserted to take the heat off me. “She can get dressed during her first break.”

“Are you on Bixie?” Damien snapped.

At the Heller’s house, tutors, music teachers, secondary (or even tertiary) nannies, and parents observing their childcare employees might push the ratio of adults to children as high as 4:1, but a single moment where a child wandered the mansion unattended was completely unacceptable.

“I’ll follow her. Is Tabitha all set?”

“Yeah, we’ll come find you when she’s on break!” Fei replied.

By the time I found Bixie, she had redecorated with over a dozen tiny colorful dresses splattered across the white bedroom like a Pollock painting.

“I wanna wear all them,” Bixie said.

“Let’s start with one and maybe we’ll change later. Do you want me to pick or do you want to pick?”

“Me pick...” Her voice was already lost in thought as her eyes scanned her options. I had no agenda, so I gave her time to pick through the silk, tulle, lace, embroidered, and beaded options.

“She’s not dressed yet?”

Sighing, I turned to find Mr. Micromanager leaning on the doorframe, fiddling with his USB necklace.

*Damien needs a bell on his collar.*

“She’s just deciding what to wear. This seems like an important expression of self and creativity,” I cooed.

A scowl was still set on his forehead but I think his buttocks unclenched somewhat.

*I’m beginning to speak your language.*