

# The Nanny Diaries

By Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus

Excerpt

Chapter One - Nanny for Sale

"Hi, this is Alexis at the Parents League. I'm just calling to follow up on the uniform guidelines we sent over . . ." The blond woman volunteering behind the reception desk holds up a bejeweled finger, signaling me to wait while she continues on the phone.

"Yes, well, this year we'd really like to see all your girls in longer skirts, at least twenty inches. We're still getting complaints from the mothers at the boys' schools in the vicinity . . . Great. Good to hear it. Bye." With a grand gesture she crosses the word "Spence" off her list of three items.

She returns her attention to me. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. With the school year starting we're just crazed." She draws a big circle around the second item on her list, "paper towels." "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to put up an ad for a nanny, but the bulletin board seems to have moved," I say, slightly confused as I've been advertising here since I was thirteen.

"We had to take it down while the foyer was being painted and never got around to moving it back. Here, let me show you." She leads me to the central room, where mothers perch at Knoll desks fielding inquiries about the Private Schools. Before me sits the full range of Upper East Side diversity — half of the women are dressed in Chanel suits and Manolo Blahniks, half are in six-hundred-dollar barn jackets, looking as if they might be asked to pitch an Aqua Scutum tent at any moment.

Alexis gestures to the bulletin board, which has displaced a Mary Cassatt propped against the wall. "It's all a bit disorganized at the moment," she says as another woman looks up from the floral arrangement she's rearranging nearby. "But don't worry. Tons of lovely girls come here to look for employment, so you shouldn't have any trouble finding someone." She raises her hand to her pearls. "Don't you have a son at Buckley? You look so familiar. I'm Alexis —"

"Hi," I say. "I'm Nan. Actually, I took care of the Gleason girls. I think they lived next door to you."

She arches an eyebrow to give me a once-over. "Oh . . . Oh, Nanny, that's right," she confirms for herself, before retreating back to her desk.

I tune out the officious, creamy chatter of the women behind me to read the postings put up by other nannies also in search of employment.

*Babysitter need children*

*very like kids,*

*vacuums*

*I look your kids*

*Many years work*

*You call me*

The bulletin board is already so overcrowded with flyers that, with a twinge of guilt, I end up tacking my ad over someone else's pink paper festooned with crayon flowers, but spend a few minutes ensuring that I'm only covering daisies and none of her pertinent information.

I wish I could tell these women that the secret to nanny advertising isn't the decoration, it's the punctuation — it's all in the exclamation mark. While my ad is a minimalist

three-by-five card, without so much as a smiley face on it, I liberally sprinkle my advertisement with exclamations, ending each of my desirable traits with the promise of a beaming smile and unflagging positivity.

*Nanny at the Ready!*

*Chapin School alumna available weekdays part-time!*

*Excellent references!*

*Child Development Major at NYU!*

The only thing I don't have is an umbrella that makes me fly.

I do one last quick check for spelling, zip up my backpack, bid Alexis adieu, and jog down the marble steps out into the sweltering heat.

As I walk down Park Avenue the August sun is still low enough in the sky that the stroller parade is in full throttle. I pass many hot little people, looking resignedly uncomfortable in their sticky seats. They are too hot even to hold on to any of their usual traveling companions — blankies and bears are tucked into back stroller pockets. I chuckle to myself at the child who waves away the offer of a juice box with a flick of the hand and a toss of the head that says, "I couldn't possibly be bothered with juice right now."

Waiting at a red light, I look up at the large glass windows that are the eyes of Park Avenue. From a population-density point of view, this is the Midwest of Manhattan. Towering above me are rooms — rooms and rooms and rooms. And they are empty. There are powder rooms and dressing rooms and piano rooms and guest rooms and, somewhere above me, but I won't say where, a rabbit named Arthur has sixteen feet square all to himself.

I cut across Seventy-second Street, passing under the shade of the blue awnings of the Polo mansion, and turn into Central Park. Pausing in front of the playground, where a few tenacious children are trying their best despite the heat, I reach in my backpack for a small bottle of water — just as something crashes into my legs. I look down and steady the offending object, an old-fashioned wooden hoop.

"Hey, that's mine!" A small boy of about four or so careens down the hill from where I see he's been posing for a portrait with his parents. His sailor hat topples off into the patchy grass as he runs.

"That's my hoop," he announces.

"Are you sure?" I ask. He looks perplexed. "It could be a wagon wheel." I hold it sideways. "Or a halo?" I hold it above his blond head. "Or a really large pizza?" I hold it out to him, gesturing that he can take it. He's smiling broadly at me as he grasps it in his hands.

"You, silly!" He drags it back up the hill, passing his mother as she strolls down to retrieve the hat.

"I'm sorry," she says, brushing dust off the striped brim as she approaches me. "I hope he didn't bother you." She holds her hand out to block the sun from her pale blue eyes.

"No, not at all."

"Oh, but your skirt — " She glances down.

"No big deal," I laugh, dusting off the mark the hoop left on the fabric. "I work with kids, so I'm used to being banged up."

"Oh, you do?" She angles her body so her back is to her husband and a blond woman who stands off to the side of the photographer holding a juice box for the boy. His nanny, I presume. "Around here?"<p>

"Actually, the family moved to London over the summer, so— "

"We're ready!" the father calls impatiently.

"Coming!" she calls back brightly. She turns to me, tilting her delicately featured face away from him. She lowers her voice. "Well, we're actually looking for someone who might want to help us out part-time."

"Really? Part-time would be great, because I have a full course load this semester — "

"What's the best way to reach you?"

I rummage through my backpack for a pen and a scrap of notebook on which I can scribble down my information. "Here you go." I pass her the paper and she discreetly slips it in the pocket of her shift, before adjusting the headband in her long, dark hair.

"Wonderful." She smiles graciously. "Well, it was a pleasure to meet you. I'll be in touch." She takes a few steps up the hill and then turns around. "Oh, how silly of me — I'm Mrs. X."

I return the smile before she goes back to take her place in the contrived tableau. The sun filters through the leaves, creating dappled sunshine on the three figures. Her husband, in a white seersucker suit, stands squarely in the middle, his hand on the boy's head, as she slides in beside them.

The blond woman steps forward with a comb and the little boy waves to me, causing her to turn and follow his gaze. As she shields her eyes to get a better look at me I turn and continue on my way across the park.

My grandmother greets me in her entryway in a linen Mao Tse-tung outfit and pearls. "Darling! Come in. I was just finishing my tai-chi." She gives me a kiss on both cheeks and a solid hug for good measure. "Honey, you're damp. Would you like to shower?" There is nothing better than being offered Grandma's buffet of amenities.

"Maybe just a cold washcloth?"

"I know what you need." She takes my hand, weaving her fingers through mine, and leads me to her guest powder room. I've always adored how the small lights of the antique crystal chandelier illumine the rich peach chintz. But my favorite part is the framed French paper dolls. When I was little I would set up a salon under the sink, for which Grandma would provide real tea and topics for the discussions I would lead with all of my lovely French guests.

She places my hands under the faucet and runs cool water over my wrists. "Pressure points for distributing fire," she says as she sits down on the toilet seat, crossing her legs. She's right; I begin to cool down immediately.

"Have you eaten?" she asks.

"I had breakfast."

"What about lunch?"

"It's only eleven, Gran."

"Is it? I've been up since four. Thank God for Europe or I'd have no one to talk to till eight."

I smile. "How have you been?"

"I've been seventy-four for two months, that's how I've been." She points her toes like a dancer and slightly lifts the hem of her pants. "It's called Sappho— I had it done at Arden's this morning — what do you think? Too too?" She wiggles her coral toes.

"Gorgeous, very sexy. Okay, as much as I would love to spend the rest of the day in here I've got to drag myself downtown and make my offering to the Tuition Gods." I turn off the sink and shake my hands dramatically over the basin.

She hands me a towel. "You know, I don't remember having a single conversation like the ones you describe when I was at Vassar." She is referring to my endless history of tete-a-tetes with the administrative staff at NYU.

I follow behind her into the kitchen. "Today I'm prepared. I've got my Social Security card, my driver's license, my passport, a Xerox copy of my birth certificate, every piece of mail I've ever received from NYU, and my letter of acceptance. This time I won't be told I don't go there, haven't completed the last semester, haven't paid my tuition from last year, haven't paid my library fees, don't have the correct ID number, Social Security number, proof of my address, the right forms, or simply don't exist."

"My, my, my." She opens the fridge. "Bourbon?"

"Orange juice would be great."

"Kids." She rolls her eyes and points me to her old air conditioner sitting on the floor. "Darling, let me get the doorman to help you carry it."

"No, Gran, I got it," I say, trying valiantly to heave the machine into my arms before slamming it back down on the tile. "Yeah, okay, I think I'm going to have to come back later with Josh and get this."

"Joshua?" she asks with a raised eyebrow. "Your little blue-haired friend? He weighs five pounds soaking wet."

"Well, unless we want Dad throwing his back out again, that's about all I have to choose from in the boy department."

"I chant for you every morning, darling," she says, reaching for a glass. "Come on. Let me whip you up some Eggs Benedict."

I glance up at the old Nelson wall clock. "I wish I had time, but I've gotta get downtown before the line at the registrar is around the block."

She gives me a kiss on both cheeks. "Well, then bring that Joshua by at seven and I'll feed you both a proper meal — you're disappearing!"

Josh groans and rolls slowly onto his back from where he has nearly blacked out after

dropping the air conditioner outside my front door.

"You lied to me," he wheezes. "You said it was on the third floor."

"Yeah?" I say, shaking out my lower arms while leaning back against the top stair.

He lifts his head an inch off the floor. "Nan, that was six flights. Two flights a floor, which makes this technically, like, the sixth floor."

"You helped me move out of the dorm — "

"Yeah, why was that? Oh, right, because it has an el-e-va-tor."

"Well, the good news is that I'm not planning on moving out of here, ever. This is it. You can visit me up here when we're old and gray." I wipe the sweat off my forehead.

"Forget it--I'll be hanging out on your front stoop with the rest of the blue hairs." He drops his head back down.

"Come on." I pull myself up by the banister. "Cold beers await." I unlock all three locks and open the door. The apartment feels like a car that's been sitting in the hot sun and we have to step back to let the scorching air blow past us into the hallway.

"Charlene must have closed the windows before she left this morning," I say.

"And left the oven on," he adds, stepping behind me into the tiny entryway that also does double duty as a kitchen.

"Welcome to my fully equipped closet. Can I toast you a bagel?" I drop my keys next to the two-burner stove.

"What are you paying for this place?" he asks.

"You don't want to know," I say, as we push the air conditioner across the room together in little shoves.

"So, where's the hot roommate?" he asks.

"Josh, not all stewardesses are hot. Some are the matronly type."

"Is she?" He stops.

"Don't stop." We resume pushing. "No — she's hot, but I don't like you assuming she's hot. She flew to France or Spain or something this morning," I huff as we round the corner to my end of the L-shaped studio.

"George!" Josh cries out in greeting to my cat, who's sprawled out on the warm wooden floor in despair. He lifts his gray, furry head half an inch and meows plaintively. Josh straightens up and wipes his forehead with the bottom of his Mr. Bubble T-shirt.

"Where do you want this sucker?"

I point to the top of the window.

"What? You a crazy lady."

"It's a trick I learned on the Avenue, 'so as not to interfere with the view.' Those without central air go to great lengths to hide it, darling," I explain as I kick off my sandals.

"What view?"

"If you smoosh your face against the window and look left you can see the river."

"Hey, you're right." He pulls back from the glass. "Listen — this whole Josh-heaving-heavy-machinery-up-to-balance-on-sheet-of-glass-thing, not gonna happen, Nan. I'm getting a beer. Come on, George."

He heads back to the "kitchen" and George stretches up to follow him. I use the moment alone to grab a clean tank top out of an open box and pull off my sweaty one. As I crouch behind the boxes to change I catch sight of the red light from my answering machine blinking in a frenzy from the floor. The word "full" glares up at me.

"Running that 900 number again?" Josh reaches over the box to hand me a Corona.

"Practically. I put my ad up for a new position today and the mummies are restless." I take a swig of my beer and slide down between the boxes to hit play.

A woman's voice fills the room: "Hi, this is Mimi Van Owen. I saw your ad at the league. I'm looking for someone to help me look after my son. Just part-time, you understand. Maybe two, three, four days a week, half-days or longer and some nights or weekends, or both! Whenever you have time. But I just want you to know that I'm very involved."

"Well, that's just obvious, Mimi," Josh says, sliding down to join me.

"HithisisAnnSmithI'mlookingforsomeonetowatchmyfiveyearoldsonhe'snotrouble reallyandwerunaveryrelaxedhousehold —"

"Ouch." Josh puts his hands up to shield himself and I forward to the next message.

"Hi. I'm Betty Potter. I saw your ad at the Parents League. I have a five-year-old girl, Stanton, a three-year-old boy, Tinford, a ten-month-old, Jace, and I'm looking for someone who can help me, since I'm pregnant again. Now you didn't mention your fee in the ad, but I've been paying six."

"Six American dollars?" I ask the machine, incredulously.

"Hey, Betty, I know a crack-whore down in Washington Square Park who'd do it for a quarter." Josh swigs his beer.

"Hi, it's Mrs. X. We met in the park this morning. Give me a call when you get a chance. I'd like to talk more about the type of job you're looking for. We have a girl-Caitlin--but she's looking to cut her hours and you made quite an impression on our son,

Grayer. Look forward to talking to you. Bye."

"She sounds normal. Call her."

"You think?" I ask as the phone rings, making us both jump. I pick up the receiver. "Hello," I say in instant nanny mode, trying to convey utmost respectability with two syllables.

"Hello" — my mother matches my deep, fancy tone — "how'd the air-conditioner mission turn out?"

"Hey." I relax. "Fine —"

"Wait, hold on." I hear a scuffle. "I have to keep moving Sophie — she's determined to sit two inches from the air conditioner." I smile at the image of our fourteen-year-old springer spaniel with her ears blowing out behind her like the Red Baron. "Move it, Soph — and now she's sitting on all the research for the grant."

I take a sip of beer. "How's that coming?"

"Ugh, it's too depressing — tell me something cheerful." Since the Republicans took office my mother's Coalition for Women's Shelters gets even less money than it used to.

"I got some funny messages from mummies-in-need," I offer.

"I thought we discussed this." Her lawyer voice is back. "Nan, you take these jobs and within days you're up at three in the morning worrying if the little princess has tap dancing or a jam session with the Dalai Lama —"

"Mom. Mommm-I haven't even interviewed yet. Besides, I'm not going to be working as many hours this year, because I have my thesis."

"Exactly! That's exactly it. You have your thesis, just like last year you had your internship and the year before that you had your field study. I don't understand why you won't even consider an academic job. You should ask your thesis professor if you can assist him. Or you could work in the research library!"

"We have been over this a million times." I roll my eyes at Josh. "Those jobs are so competitive — Dr. Clarkson has a graduate student on full fellowship assisting him. Besides, they only pay six dollars an hour — before taxes. Mom, nothing I do with my clothes on is going to pay this well until I get my degree." Josh shimmies and pulls off an imaginary bra.

My mother lucked out with a research assistant position that she held on to for all four years of her undergraduate work. However, that was when housing near Columbia cost as much as I am currently paying for utilities. "Do I have to give you the Real Estate Talk again, Mom?"

"Then, for the love of God, be a makeup girl at Bloomingdale's. Just punch in your time card, look pretty, smile, and get your paycheck." She can't imagine that one would ever wake at three a.m. in a cold sweat, wondering if the shipment of oil-free toner had

remembered to put on its Nighttime Pull-Ups."

"Mom, I enjoy working with kids. Look, it's too hot to argue."

"Just promise me you'll think about it this time before you take a job. I don't want you graduating on Valium because some woman with more money than she knows what to do with left you her kid while she ran off to Cannes."

And I do think about it, while Josh and I listen to all the messages again trying to find the mother who sounds least likely to do just that.