

NAME  
DROPPING

# NAME DROPPING

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*For Ellen Levine,  
my friend and literary agent,  
whose own funny story inspired this novel*

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# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN THE INVITATION ARRIVED in the mail, I assumed it was a joke.

America's ambassador to Great Britain was requesting the honour of *my* presence at a black-tie reception at the United Nations?

Sure, and pip-pip to you too, I thought as I leaned against the tiny refrigerator in the tiny kitchen of my tiny apartment. What's next? Afternoon tea with the queen?

I examined the invitation, running my hand over it, holding it up to the light, checking for some indication of who might have sent it. All I could determine was that, yup, it was addressed to me—Nancy Stern, 137 East Seventy-first Street, New York, New York 10021—and that it did seem authentic with its bold, black-scripted letters, heavy, wedding-invitation-type card stock, and official-looking seal. But how could it be authentic?

I was hardly a regular on the international circuit, hardly a pal of America's ambassador to Great Britain, hardly a pal of America's ambassador to *anyplace*. I was a teacher at Small Blessings, a nursery school on Manhattan's Upper East Side. I spent my days, not with foreign diplomats discussing trade agreements, human rights, or weapons of mass destruction, but with prekindergarteners singing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." Moreover, the sort of diplomacy I practiced involved convincing four-year-olds that nose-picking, while not an



inherently bad thing, is nevertheless a “poor choice” when socializing with others.

Me at a black-tie reception at the U.N., I scoffed as I tossed the invitation into the garbage. The last party I went to was when Lindsay Greenblatt turned five and her mother brought cupcakes to school for the class’s snack.

Yeah, I’m a real party animal, I thought, mentally ticking off the more recent Saturday nights during which I’d stayed home with a good book rather than prowl the city’s trendy clubs looking for love. Please. Shortly after I’d gotten divorced and found myself back in circulation, it became abundantly clear that Mr. Wonderful wasn’t waiting for me on a strobe-lit dance floor. Call me old-fashioned but my idea of heaven isn’t a guy in a sweat-drenched tank top, bumping and grinding and hip-hopping to Puff Daddy Combs.

Not that I didn’t go out now and then, do the things typical single-women-in-their-thirties do. I attended other people’s weddings, spent the occasional weekend at somebody’s summer rental, dated friends of friends, you know how it works. Unfortunately, my special man never materialized no matter how often I ventured out, and so, little by little, I stopped venturing out. Perhaps I had no romance in my life because I wasn’t ready for a relationship. Perhaps I had no romance in my life because I was too picky, although it didn’t seem *too* much to ask that the man not pierce his nipples. Or perhaps, like millions of other unattached women, I had no romance in my life because of the phenomenon I associate with warehouses: Overstocked! Too Much Inventory! Surplus! Yes, perhaps, it was simply that there was a surplus of single women and I didn’t have the energy to fight the odds, unlike my best friend and associate teacher Janice Mason, a veritable Energizer bunny when it came to men.

Janice!

That’s when it dawned on me: The invitation to the reception at the U.N. must be her handiwork!

A helium-balloon-voiced woman with pixie-short blond hair, a trim, athletic figure, and a go-for-it, try-anything, follow-your-bliss attitude toward life, Janice loved fooling around on her computer, loved experimenting with different fonts and formats, loved printing out phony documents—sweepstakes come-ons, letters from the IRS, you name it—and sending them to people as a goof. A real prankster, that Janice. Such a kidder.

She also loved flirting with men over the Internet, hoping her overheated E-mails would lead to equally overheated responses, which would lead to in-person encounters, which would lead to marriage proposals. (They never did.)

We spent a great deal of after-school time together, she and I, and were compatible in many important ways, but where I couldn't care less about Web sites and chat rooms and dot com this and dot com that, Janice viewed her computer with the same sense of wonder as the kids in our class viewed their Pokémon paraphernalia. Yes, I decided. She mailed me the invitation. Ha-ha, Janice. Good one.

I confronted her at school the next morning while our sixteen young charges were crayoning pictures of turkeys in anticipation of the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday.

"I didn't send it, Nancy," she replied. "I couldn't have sent it. My computer's down."

"Tell me something," I said. "What's so great about computers if they're always *down*?"

"They're not always down," Janice said with conviction. "They run into problems every now and then, just like people do. What's important here is that they're our bridge to the rest of the human race, the linchpins of our intellectual infrastructure."

Intellectual infrastructure. This from a woman I'd once caught eating Play-Doh.

"Well, somebody sent the invitation," I said, getting back to the mysterious missive. "Do we know any jokesters besides you?"

"Forget jokesters. Maybe the invitation is on the level."

“Yeah, and maybe I’m Madeleine Albright.”

“Okay, what about one of the other teachers, although none of them is a barrel of laughs.”

Janice was referring to Victoria Bittner, the head teacher of the other group of four-year-olds. A painter who couldn’t sell her paintings, Victoria took out her frustrations on the walls of her classroom, creating ridiculously over-the-top murals to tie in with each change of season. And then there was Nick Spada, the head teacher of one of the two groups of three-year-olds. Nick was a grad student at night, getting his masters in child psychology. He was much too busy, never mind deadly serious, to send jokey invitations to me or anyone else. And finally, there was Fran Golden, Nick’s counterpart as the head teacher of the other group of three-year-olds. Fran was as sweet as they come but a tad on the syrupy side. If you’re old enough to remember the teacher on *Romper Room*, you’ve got Fran to a tee. As for the assistant teachers who worked with Victoria, Nick, and Fran, they were just-out-of-college twentysomethings who spent their free time grousing about the low salaries they were earning in comparison to their friends who had chosen the corporate life.

“Of course, it’s possible that the invitation did come from the embassy but that their computer printed out the wrong name,” Janice added. “Why don’t you RSVP and see?”

I was about to explain that I had already chucked the invitation when I noticed that a scuffle had broken out between two of the children, Fischer Levin and Todd Delafield, over which of them was entitled to use the black crayon.

“Fischer! Todd! Over here, please!” I called out to them as Fischer was in the act of punching Todd in the stomach. “Right now!” I was speaking in my authoritative, preschool teacher voice, the one that worked well with small boys but was less effective with grown men. (Ask my ex-husband.)

“I didn’t do anything, Miss Stern. Todd was coloring on the *table* instead of on the paper like you said to. I was just trying to take the

black crayon away from him so he wouldn't make a mess," claimed Fischer, who was articulate for his age but a big fat liar.

I know that sounds uncharitable, but Fischer Levin *was* fat and he *did* lie. All the time. He was a troublemaker, very disruptive, and whenever he was disciplined, he'd make up a whopper in an effort to cast blame on someone else. I asked his parents to come in and discuss his behavior, but they were Mr. and Mrs. We-Made-a-Bundle-in-the-Market and were too busy living it up to perform such a trivial errand. Instead, they dispatched Olga, Fischer's caregiver, who arrived for the conference in the same chauffeur-driven limo that transported Fischer to school every morning—a custom, silver Mercedes with POLO KING on its license plate. Olga was a plump, rosy-cheeked woman who had just joined the Levin household after immigrating from Latvia. She promised to convey my concerns to her employers, but cautioned me not to expect a response as she didn't have much clout with them. "Dun't forget, I am fourth or fifth nanny to Fischer in last six months," she said, her accent thick with her native land. "Not a lot I can do for child in situation like dat, you know?"

I turned to Todd, and asked him to tell Fischer how it felt to be punched in the stomach and what Fischer might say to get things back on track between them. This is what nursery school teachers do in the modern era: practice couples therapy. Never mind that the couples are four years old. Our job is to encourage the participants to express their feelings, to understand the consequences of their actions, to verbalize.

"All I know is Fischer socked me in my tummy," verbalized Todd, whose mother had given birth to twins the week before. Todd's mommy, like several of the mommies of the kids at Small Blessings, was an older, career mommy who had taken fertility drugs to get pregnant. Her twins were only the most recent multiple births making news at school; in September, Gabriel Lester's mother had produced triplets.

"Fischer," I said, bending over to pat the boy's curly brown head. "Did you hit Todd?"

"No."

"Fischer, what have we been learning about lying?"

"I'm not—" He reconsidered. "That we're not supposed to."

"Very good. What have we been learning about hitting?"

"That we're not supposed to."

"Right. Now, what have we been learning about being mean to the other children?"

"THAT WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO!"

"I can hear you, Fischer. The next time you have a problem with someone in the class, I want you to use *words* to tell the person how you feel deep inside." I took Todd's little hand and drew him toward his bullier. "So how about using words with Todd and telling him you're sorry about what happened?"

Fischer's response was to stick his tongue out at Todd.

"Well, Miss Mason," I said to Janice, "I guess Fischer will have to sit in Time-out." For the uninitiated, making a child sit in Time-out is the contemporary equivalent of making a child sit in the corner. In other words, Time-out is teacher-speak for punishment, but we don't use the "P" word anymore. Too negative.

"Fischer, go sit in Time-out and think about how you could have handled the crayon situation differently," said Janice, pointing him in the direction of the group of empty chairs next to a poster of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

"Okay, but if you keep making me sit in Time-out, my dad will sue you," Fischer threatened as he marched away.

Janice looked at me and smirked. "Better get on the phone to a lawyer, huh?"

I laughed, shrugging. For all I knew, Fischer's father *would* sue. Small Blessings is an exclusive preschool that attracts the sort of parents who think being able to afford a hefty tuition entitles them to act like maniacs—litigious maniacs. For example, Tyler Snelling's

parents sued the school because Janice and I permitted their son to prance around in a ballet tutu during costume play. (Their lawsuit accused us of “trying to turn him gay.”) Emily Oberman’s parents sued because Benjamin Weeks kissed Emily while they were swinging on the monkey bars. (They claimed we were promoting a climate of sexual harrassment.) And Samantha Klein’s parents sued because their daughter got head lice. (Their lawsuit mentioned the utter humiliation associated with having to hire a professional nitpicker.)

I’m not saying that all the parents are nutcases, but the ones who are, really are, and their nuttiness rubs off on their “trophy offspring.” I mean, these are people who are intense about seeing their kid at Harvard. They truly believe that once the little darling is accepted at Small Blessings, the rest is gravy. In their minds, getting into the right preschool guarantees admission to the right private school which guarantees admission to the right college, provided the kid doesn’t do something stupid—like have ideas of his own. As a teacher, I always tried, as diplomatically as possible, to discourage them from projecting so far into the future; to stop putting pressure on their child and, instead, focus on his day-to-day accomplishments. Sometimes, I was successful; sometimes, not.

Fischer Levin sat in Time-out, and Todd Delafield went back to coloring his turkey. A few minutes later, Fischer trudged over to Todd and apologized for the crayon incident. A few minutes after that, he invited Todd to his apartment for an after-school playdate. Todd responded by holding his stomach and claiming he didn’t feel well enough to spend the afternoon at Fischer’s, even after I said I’d call both of their caregivers to get permission.

“Come on, Todd. You’ll have fun,” I coaxed, not wanting Fischer’s act of contrition to go unrewarded. “Fischer did á brave thing by telling you he was sorry he hit you.”

Todd shook his head, his lower lip beginning to quiver. “My tummy hurted before he hit me. It hurted me before I came to school.”

I held Todd in my arms, rubbed his back soothingly. "I think I see the problem, honey. It's hard for you at home, with the two new babies around." I assumed his stomach ache was really an ache for his mother's attention, that he was merely feeling eclipsed by the twins. "Remember that you're the big boy in the family now, Todd, and your mommy's so proud of how well you're doing in school. Just wait until she sees the turkey you're coloring for Thanks—"

Before I could conclude my speech, Todd threw up in my lap.

"And people think this is a glamour job," I said to Janice as I hurried Todd and my puke-soaked self to the bathroom.

After I'd returned home from school that afternoon, hopped out of my stinky clothes, and showered and changed, I sorted through my mail. There, amidst the bills and magazines and catalogs promoting products for the house and garden, was yet another invitation addressed to Nancy Stern at 137 East Seventy-first Street.

This one—are you ready?—requested the pleasure of my company at a private screening of the new Harrison Ford movie, followed by champagne and a light supper. At the director's apartment in Sutton Place, no less.

What in the world is going on? I wondered, genuinely bewildered now. Why am I suddenly on the guest lists of people who don't even know I exist? Or do they?

I shook my head as I reread the invitation and then indulged in a brief fantasy, imagining myself actually attending the screening, mingling with the glittering Hollywood set, bewitching them with witty and clever anecdotes about my oh-so-fascinating life as a nursery school teacher.

Right.

I sighed as I put the invitation aside for the moment and opened the rest of the mail.

And then I received another jolt: my American Express bill. Ac-

According to the invoice, my tab for October was \$10,560, which was pretty steep considering that the only item I'd put on my card that month was the fifty bucks I'd spent on plants hoping to perk up my dreary apartment.

I stood, open-mouthed, as I ran down the list of charges. The round-trip ticket to London. The hotel bill from the Savoy. The round-trip ticket to L.A. The hotel bill from the Bel Air. There were other goodies—dinners at New York's hippest restaurants, merchandise from Madison Avenue boutiques, visits to some hair salon I'd never heard of, let alone been to—but the trips to London and Los Angeles were what really jumped out at me. Could they be linked to the invitations from the ambassador to Great Britain and the Hollywood movie director? And if so, how?

I went back over all the charges, then checked the remittance slip yet again. As before, I verified that my name and address were correct. But this time, I noticed that the account number wasn't mine.

Ah-ha, I thought. What's going on here isn't a joke or an intrigue. It's a mistake. A clerical error.

I called American Express to report the mix-up and was informed that there was a simple explanation behind it. Another woman named Nancy Stern had recently moved into my building and her mail must have been placed inadvertently in my mailbox. The customer service representative apologized for the error and promised to advise the other Nancy Stern to include her apartment number in her address in order to avoid this type of confusion.

The other Nancy Stern, I mused after I hung up. A Nancy Stern who's chummy with ambassadors and movie stars, apparently. A Nancy Stern who travels, shops, dines fine. A Nancy Stern who, according to the American Express lady, lives in 24A, on the rarified penthouse floor of the building, not in 6J, on my thoroughly *average* floor. A Nancy Stern who, I'd be willing to bet, doesn't regularly get vomited upon by four-year-olds.



- Yes, there was a simple explanation for the invitations and the \$10,000 charge card bill that had appeared in my mailbox. The trouble is, simple explanations often obscure the complicated situations to follow. At least, that was the case with me.