

CHAPTER 1

If age thirty-nine were a fruit, some days I feel confident she'd be a beautiful yellow banana—just ripe, the best in the bowl, still young but deeply wise and poised to tackle her prime. She does the elusive *all*, with grit and passion and strength.

Marathon?

Banana.

Stomach bug?

Banana.

She is energy and potassium, with children of her own, perhaps, while her own mother still lives and breathes. The sweetest spot, in the center, that magical middle of everything. There is nothing thirty-nine cannot do.

Other days, I'm positive thirty-nine is a raisin. Boxed in. Sweet, maybe; delicious to some. She's a pretty good snack in a pinch but has the effect of shrinking into both herself and the background. One of a handful, blending. The best seems behind her, mostly. Does anyone even *eat* raisins anymore, unless they're part of a trail mix, second place

to the chocolate and peanuts? Cotton Candy grapes (say, age ten) and expensive wine (maybe sixty) are by far the superior and more interesting iterations of this particular fruit.

Today, I'm the latter. *The raisin*. No doubt on earth. I'm shriveling next to my thirteen-year-old son, the coolest kid anyone knows. He murders me with his side-eye as I sink lower into the passenger seat.

"Mom, seriously? You had to leave the house with those *rags* in your hair?" He lifts a hand to his face in a shield as if to ward off possible witnesses.

One hand on the wheel, I scoff and note that I need a manicure. "They're not *rags*, Max. They're *heatless hair rollers*. I saw them on TikTok."

"What are you even doing on TikTok?" he whines. I don't have to see his eye roll to know it's scraping our SUV's ceiling.

"I use it for work. And spying on you now, apparently." I'm still frustrated, and so is he. He's angry about being the only kid in middle school who doesn't possess a smartphone; I'm angry at him for breaking our no-social-media rule in a big way.

Yes, our seventh-grade son created an entire secret YouTube channel of his sports commentary videos, straight from the family iPad. Unfortunately, they were spectacular. *Extra Point* by Maxwell Layne has gone viral on various social media platforms: Instagram, TikTok, the works. Strangers worldwide were rave-commenting, gushing paragraphs of praise. Were they predators? Killers? Who knew!

But the thing was, genuine pride mixed with my horror at the discovery. Had Max just *asked* us if he could begin expressing himself in this way, we might have reconsidered our statute. Instead, he spent months covertly building an online universe, one sneaky swipe at a time. And I had to stumble upon it innocently while searching for old Britney Spears music videos to amplify the experience of reading her memoir. *We have rules, Maxwell James, for great reasons. Social media is the devil if you let him wild.*

I gulp, my thoughts landing back on Saturday night with a guilty clunk. That message, unanswered, burning a hole in my Facebook Messenger app:

Hey you! Long time . . .

Nope. Not today, Satan. Never.

Max, unlike me, had lied and sneaked—which was the point and the call for punishment. So, he remained grounded for two more weeks and banned from any semblance of screens.

“You can’t really blame him, Mom,” pipes a sassy voice from the back. “You’re *obsessed* with your phone.”

“Addicted,” echoes her twin.

I peer into the rearview, feeling attacked, glancing from ten-year-old face to identical face. Maisy, the parrot, with her soft brown hair in two neat French braids, freckles on her cute nose. She’s the more mellow of the girls—the reverse of her bold sister, our sharp and precocious Malone. Maisy meanders through life as if it’s a meadow, while Malone forms friends and ideas faster than a mom late to school on the toll road.

How can twins be so . . . *untwinny*? I ask myself this every day.

“I’m not *addicted*,” I defend. “I need it for work.” And texts. And groceries. And true crime podcasts. And voice notes the *length* of those podcasts.

“And *Instagram!*” all three of them chant in unison.

I clench the wheel, annoyed. “Do you guys *like* having a life? Because my phone is also your portal to fun. If you want, I can just . . .” I press the button and my window descends. I dangle my iPhone over the asphalt.

“*Stop!*” Maisy claps a palm to her cheek, her nail polish fresher than mine, I observe in the rearview.

“Yes, we *do* need you to keep the family organized.” Malone’s voice is earnest. “But I have seen those called *rag rollers*, Mom. Sorry. They’re *rags*.”

Suddenly doubting my beauty risk, I reach up to twist the black-and-white polka-dot fabric ends of the sausage thing crowning my head. I might be serving 1950s housewife vibes at the moment, but the *after* pictures promised me stunning results. I have a big prospective client meeting today, so it seemed a great time to try them. Like a brilliant plan!

Until now. Nothing like a pack of tweens to eviscerate your self-confidence. “You’ll all take it back when you see my perfect curls later.” I try to sound sure as I spin my white Suburban onto the street of Coast Academy, our private Christian elementary and middle school in Newport Beach, California.

Modern and boxy, high-tech but still homey, the gray-and-white school stands as a beacon in our Orange County community. Fresh succulents rim the perimeter, along with joyful morning playground attendants wearing big smiles and silly hats. They love our kids immensely, with all of their hearts and their hand gestures.

I flip on my blinker to enter the morning drop-off line, a river ever-efficiently flowing. Elsewhere in town, this massive car can feel like a monster. But here, I am home. I stream into our daily tributary with the other gargantuan vehicles.

A black Ford Expedition pauses to let me in, and I perk up when I see that it’s Quinn. I wave wildly and mouth, *See you soon!*

“Mom, *stop!*” Malone begs from the back. “You’re being so *extra* this morning.”

I shoot her a look before grabbing my phone again—*addict*—and tapping Spotify. Taylor Swift blares from the speakers.

“*Are we out of the woods?*” I belt, breaking into a dance, snapping my fingers. I spy Quinn behind me, applauding.

Victory.

“Ugh!” Max groans and buries his face in his hands. He has a huge crush on Quinn’s daughter, Cat, eleven. My sandy-haired boy with his disarming grin, killer bone structure, and swagger of a celebrity. At that

tender impasse of beginning to look like a man but still loving Harry Potter. Liking girls already.

“Can you *stop?*” he begs. “I hate you.”

It’s quiet, the last part, the bite. Like the growl of a cub with no idea how much he still needs his mother.

I flinch. “Don’t say that, Max. You don’t mean it.”

“Trust me,” he storms, face smashed to the window. “I do.”

Sighing, I swivel to look at the girls. Maisy says nothing, bug-eyed; she’s usually sweet to me. Thank God. One out of three? Were those the odds? The dice we all rolled at the cosmic table of motherhood?

Malone’s tone matches Max’s, per usual. “Can you at least play something from *Tortured Poets?* Newer Taylor? This song is so tired.”

You know who’s tired? I want to say. *Me.*

I sigh, reduce the volume, and breathe.

“Are you girls excited to find out your parts in the play?” I ask, hoping my heartfelt question defuses the tension. “Three more days!” Last week they tried out for *Annie* at school—to be the star orphan herself. They’re hoping to share the part, which I find so inventive and sisterly. Maybe inspired by *Full House* reruns and their mad love for Michelle. Still, as a former theater major, I’m proud. My chest puffs out just imagining them in the iconic red dress and wig. The cast list will be posted on Friday.

“Yes,” Maisy confirms. “I think we have a great chance.”

“Me too,” says Malone assuredly. “But Maisy was pitchy in most of the songs. *Come what mayyyy!* She still needs to practice. A lot.”

“I was not *pitchy!*”

“Yes, you were. *Come what mayyyy,*” Malone serenades. I don’t point out that her pitch is perfect—and that Maisy’s does leave something to be desired. Twins are tricky. You have to tread cautiously.

Instead, I chime in myself. “*Come what mayyyyy . . .*”

Silence. I feel their jaws plummet.

“What?” I shrug.

“Your voice is beautiful, Mom.” Maisy touches my shoulder. “You sound like an angel. Sometimes I forget.”

“Thank you, sweetie.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Layne,” chirps the jovial crossing guard after yanking open our doors. “On time today! Cool hair! Happy Tuesday to all of you!”

“Morning, Mr. Tate!” *I am on time today, thank you.* “It’s something new I’m trying.” The punctuality—and the hair. I fluff my ends, to Maxwell’s further dismay. My three offspring tumble out of the car, Max glowering at me viciously without a goodbye.

“I love you, Max!” I yell after him. “I love all three of you, more than anything . . .”

I swallow as they walk away, toward their days full of lessons and worlds to which I’d never be privy. Max strides alone toward the middle school building with his black backpack, Air Jordans, and strut. Only one more year before high school. My insides roil, rejecting this truth.

The twins are as distinct from the back as the front, Malone looking older and taller even though they’re the same height: her straight posture, smooth hair, and checkered Vans to Maisy’s shy slouch, bouncing braids, and sequined tennis shoes. My chest tightens every morning watching them go.

They’re just so amazing.

They’re just so big.

They’re just such a pain in my butt.

This stage of motherhood is proving harder than I imagined. It’s both a tender release and a torturous ride. I always thought I had until they turned eighteen to know this feeling of helplessness—not to mention uncoolness. The sense that I’d done all in my power to bring them to this precipice of independence.

Be gentle on them, world. Be gracious, teachers.

And maybe make Max not hate me?

And to myself: *Be what they need.* Which is what, exactly?

I tell myself to stop being dramatic. It's not even the first day of school. It's March, a crisp, sunny day full of bright air, the promise of spring.

And, of course, my big birthday.

I swerve out of the schoolyard, onward to brunch with my girlfriends. I know I'm not anywhere out of the woods with those kids; we've barely entered the jungle.

But jungles?

They grow bananas.



Paralyzed in the retail center parking lot, I wiggle my car mirror, panicking. Never mind that I'm tardy. I'm unsure if I should cackle or cry.

My meeting.

My day.

My hair.

These stupid heatless rollers advertised perfect beach waves, but instead I behold the reflection of something more like a nursery-rhyme child. If Goldilocks and Bo-Peep had a cousin in cashmere, she'd be me. My camel J.Crew sweater, cream slacks, and white leather booties were intentionally minimalist selections for my presentation today, so that the attention would stay on my design prowess and my portfolio. On our destined partnership. Instead, the spotlight will squarely shine on the baby sheep adorning my head.

I pull at my golden ends to try and flatten the whole darn farm animal—but to no avail. I yank open my center console to fish out a brush but pause before pulling it out. I really don't need this catastrophe any fluffier. I sigh, grabbing my oversized tote. I'll just pretend I look normal. Maybe my friends won't notice. It will be a nice test.

Instead of having a regular meeting spot, our trifecta has settled into a rhythm of trying a new place the second Tuesday morning of every month. Easy to remember once it became a tradition. I smile. I savor

tradition. Seven years deep, and none of us three ever misses. My throat catches. *Even though we used to be four.*

I enter the front door and take in Toast Kitchen + Bakery. Quinn picked it since it's close to the hospital. The place has been open for some time now, but I've never been. I nod my silent approval at the design aesthetic. The restaurant is cozy: eclectic and quaint, with touches of retro chic. Warm lighting glows onto lacquered wood tables. Cubby shelves on the walls hold dried flowers, vintage cookbooks, and antique appliances. The berry-red ceiling encloses the space like a grandmother's parlor room.

I hold my poufy head high as I weave my way to Quinn and Sierra, seated in the back corner. Dropping myself into a steel chair, I grin. "Hi, guys!"

Quinn's eyes widen, and Sierra covers her mouth.

"What?" I pick up a menu, playing it cool.

"Come on." Quinn squints, pointing a finger at me. "Don't even."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Aw, sweetheart," drawls Sierra, her voice Alabama honey. "Did you use one of the twins' curling irons? The smaller the barrel, the tighter the curl."

"The closer to God," Quinn deadpans.

"What, *this*?" I flip back the taut locks, which graze my clavicle instead of my typical midtorso length. "I love it!"

Quinn scrunches her nose. "It's giving . . . *presidential*."

I sense that she means more George Washington, less Jackie O.

Sierra, however, maintains her manners like always. "Or more—just—" She pauses. "It's *real* perfect. Even for me. Maybe you want to muss it up a bit?"

Muss. I love her.

I cave, then I groan. "*You guyyyyys*, I know. What should I do? I have the meeting with Colton Montana and London Paige at eleven thirty. They are the essence of . . . everything this hair is *not*."

It's true. Football superstardom had met fashion-designer royalty in one of the hottest new celebrity power couples. And somehow they wanted a meeting with *me*, Sutton Layne, to discuss the interior design of their newest property—more like kingdom—soon to be under construction up in Manhattan Beach, a crown-jewel beach town of LA's South Bay.

I wonder if I still have a beanie stashed in my trunk. Beanies are cool, at least, right? I saw London Paige wearing a designer one in a recent Instagram story. No way I could brave this hair with the thousand-dollar-beanie cool kids. But I think of myself rapping the presentation like Eminem—*one shot!*—and dismiss the idea.

“You look great,” Quinn lies. “We’ll help you fix it after we eat.”

Sierra nods. “Yes. Don’t worry!”

“Thanks, guys.” I sigh. “What would I do without you? And what did I miss?”

“We did order already,” Quinn says, “but add anything you want! Everything sounds amazing.” She lifts a *Central Perk* mug to her lips, and I like this place more by the second. I look down at my own. *Adulthood is hard*, it says. Perfect. Now extra caffeine, please.

Even though the three of us met in college at USC, our roads meandered through the years before bringing us together again—at least, as a trio. We were all Alpha Gammas together back in the day. Quinn and I met at our first pledge meeting and have been best friends every day since—but back then, we knew Sierra only peripherally as a sorority sister two years older than us. We reconnected as a group—along with our other longtime bestie, Camila—when we all became Coast Academy moms. The bond of having babies with friends was strong—but it turned out having big kids in grade school together could be even more like Gorilla Glue.

“I have to leave early today—I’m *so* sorry.” Sierra’s hair is blonde, like mine, but more platinum than my gold, and usually styled to round-brush perfection and finished with a trendy accessory. Today,

it's pulled half up with a velvet ribbon to match her black turtleneck. Her blue eyes sparkle and slant gorgeously feline. Her skin is luminous, like her smile. She runs a successful bakery—Sweet Sierra's—one of her many talents. She also helps run our school and her household of four amazing kids ages six to twelve. Her marriage to Jake, a corporate lawyer, hums along with genuine teamwork and impressive commitment to date nights. As with every part of her life, she works hard for its success. None of us knows how she does it all. Her son Crew and Max are great friends.

"How's Max doing?" she asks. "I want you to know we've had several talks with Crew about the YouTube fiasco."

I sigh. "He's . . ." So many words. "Bristly? Pissed? Thirteen?"

Quinn laughs. Her glossy black hair, parted down the middle, contrasts with Sierra's like ink to milk. Her beauty is striking—green eyes, strong eyebrows, and dewy skin. I can never tell if her hospital scrubs help or hurt her intimidation factor. As an ER doctor, she sustains one crazy schedule, one awesome kid, and one lackluster husband named Alan.

"Cat still swears she knew nothing about it. But she doesn't have any access to socials, either. Sixteen. That's my rule." Quinn slants a look across the table. "I don't mean that as a dig at your parenting, Sierra."

"I don't take it that way." Sierra shrugs, undaunted, sipping water from a mason jar. "We monitor everything, and we trust Crew. And . . . that's not a dig either. It's so hard to navigate, y'all." She pauses. "But he is *not* allowed to keep secrets. He's so sorry he didn't tell me, Sutton."

"It's fine." I wave a hand. "I just feel out of my depth lately. Are all teens so mean to their parents?"

"*Yes!*" they insist, relaxing my shoulders.

Our male server appears in a tight gray polo, full-sleeve tattoos, and close-cropped dark hair. "I have the churro French toast . . . the bacon breakfast burrito . . . and a side of the millionaire's bacon?" He drops down the dishes, plus extra plates.

Immediately I'm salivating. "Wow, you guys did *good*." I pick up my fork and aim for the bacon. "Will this make me a millionaire?"

"No, but America's favorite tight end might! So exciting, this meeting. I'll be prayin'." Sierra scoops a helping of the thick brioche, whipped cream, and cinnamon. "Quinn," she starts, "how are you and Alan these days? Anything different?"

I hate the way Quinn's radiance dims at this question. Her eyes drop, too.

"We're the same." She stabs the breakfast burrito, too hard. "I've been working a lot of nights. And it's tax season, so . . ."

She doesn't need to say more. I've never trusted Alan. Not since their meeting during Quinn's residency, not since their wedding in Monterey. His hair has thinned as his ego has grown, and he consistently cuts Quinn down. He shades her light, interrupts her stories. Rolls over silently too many nights in a row, if you ask me.

Not that I have space to talk.

Yikes. The thought came too quickly, almost surprising me. Reid and I aren't as bad as them. *Are we?* We're no Sierra and Jake. *Any more*.

"Is Alan coming to my birthday dinner on Saturday night?" I ask, choosing deflection.

Quinn just shrugs, so Sierra softballs a subject change. "Reid is such a sweetheart for doing that. And your house is the perfect party venue."

I can't help but grin, even though I'm still surprised Reid planned a party for me. In the early days of our marriage, he wowed me for every birthday and anniversary. Not necessarily extravagance, but always intentionality. Coffee in bed. Meandering hikes. Sweet Post-its dotting the house. He hasn't done anything noteworthy on one of my birthdays for . . . I've stopped counting. It stings too deeply. Now it's my turn to spear the chunky burrito.

I return my thoughts to the party. Fifty guests. Dinner served. Pink-and-gold theme. My face blooms back into a smile. "I really can't wait."

“That reminds me—” Sierra claps twice with cheerleader precision. “Are you ready for Friday morning? Your big birthday pickleball tourney?”

Among her many talents, Sierra is a rock-star pickleball player, rated 4.0 in PPA standards. My high school tennis pulls through to make us a solid doubles team, 3.5 averaged together. She insisted on hosting a pickleball brunch and competitive tournament at her country club, to celebrate my fortieth birthday with our closest mom friends from Coast.

“Ready?” I smile broadly. “I can’t wait. Are you coming, Quinn?”

“As long as I don’t have to play.”

“Come on.” Sierra pokes her shoulder. “You’re not that bad.”

“Well, I’m not *good*. Stabilizing a trauma patient? Easy yes. That stupid Wiffle ball? Hard no. But yes. I wouldn’t miss it. That’s how much I love Sutton.”

More of our breakfast feast disappears with every topic we cover. The school gala (do they even make gowns anymore that don’t have slits in the torso area?), Botox (what are we thinking lately, are we keeping it up, why is it so expensive?), and of course, once again, my birthday.

They ask me how I’m feeling—*really* feeling—about this seismic tick of the clock. At the question, silence hangs over us like a chandelier. Instead of thinking about my own life, my own imperfections and chaos at this crescendo, my gaze floats to the empty fourth chair with us.

“Gosh, I miss her.” I swallow. “I miss her so much.”

Right away, they both place a hand on mine. *She should be here*, we say without words. She’d have advice for all of us: How to parent in the digital age. How to age gracefully, not that she’d need it with that youth-fountain complexion. How to stay married, happily. How to keep going when all of it feels so hard. *What a lie that our best years are behind us!* she’d say. *We’re just getting started. And we’ll always have each other.*

Always: such a fickle word. We throw it around, hold it tight as we can, and sometimes, it stays. But sometimes, it slips. Sometimes it leaves two daughters and a husband behind, sometime around midnight. And sometimes you’re here, just three, when you used to be four.

Sierra checks her Michele watch and pushes back from the table. “Girls, I’m sorry, but I have to go finish the most gorgeous five-tiered cake for a twenty-first birthday party tonight. I’m down one baker today.”

“Twenty-one.” I whistle. “Must be nice.”

Quinn clucks her tongue. “Nope. You couldn’t pay me a billion dollars to be twenty-one again.”

I cock my head. “Really?”

“I agree.” Sierra stands. “You should meet this girl. All *over* the darn place. You forget we are women, and they are that: girls. Give ’em the tight skin. I’ll take my grit.”

“You mean your *grits*,” I joke to my Southern belle, rising to hug her. “Love you. Send pics of the cake.”

Before she goes, she cups my cheeks in her Sierra way. “Enjoy the very last of your thirties. I’ll see you Friday! Come ready to *win*!”

I blow her an air-kiss and wave, but my mind sticks like syrup to my friends’ commentary on being twenty-one again.

Go back?

I’d do it for free.