

AUTHOR OF BOOK ENDS

ZIBBY OWENS

BLANK



*"A delightful gift to book lovers." — CARLEY FORTUNE,
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF EVERY SUMMER AFTER*

PRAISE FOR *BLANK*

“Leave it to Zibby Owens to write a novel about a lovable woman single-handedly disrupting the publishing industry. *Blank* explores marriage, parenting, friendship, and the competitive high jinks of the book trade with the perfect amount of wit and light-touch humor. I devoured this book in a single sitting.”

—Annabel Monaghan, author of *Nora Goes Off Script* and *Same Time Next Summer*

“This is a sunny rom-com with a deep, dark heart—comedic and sad in equal measures. Yes, it’s a meta-satire about the publishing industry, but it’s also an authentically serious story about the pressure to be everything to everyone. Or, in other words, about what it means to be a woman.”

—Catherine Newman, author of *We All Want Impossible Things*

“Zibby Owens captures every writer’s nightmare in her fiction debut: someone beats you to the bookshelves with basically the same book you are currently writing. Add to this some genuine home drama, financial worries, and trouble in paradise, and you have a book that you race through because you just want to know what is going to happen!”

—Laurie Gelman, author of the *Class Mom* series

“Is there anything literary North Star Zibby Owens can’t do? Add novelist to her list of breaking-down-the-barriers accomplishments, and here, in this smart, hilarious, ingenious, and absolutely inspiring novel, Owens ebulliently cracks open marriage, motherhood, female friendship, social media, the perils of publishing—and our yearning to be seen, loved and understood. I was turning pages so fast, I nearly gave myself whiplash.”

—Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pictures of You* and *With or Without You*

“A witty romp, *Blank* is the perfect addition to book lovers’ bedside tables. An insider’s view of the publishing industry and a wise and beautiful celebration of love, *Blank* kept me happily reading all night and left me bereft when I reached the end of my journey with Owens’s wise and fabulous heroine Pippa.”

—Amanda Eyre Ward, author of *The Lifeguards* and *The Jetsetters*

“A delectable, engaging romp through the upper crust of the LA and New York literary worlds but refreshingly grounded and relatable, *Blank* is like sharing a cool glass of pinot gris with Zibby on a hot day, which is to say: a total treat.”

—Bess Kalb, author of *Nobody Will Tell You This But Me*

“*Blank* is full of wit, verve, and heart—a whirlwind ride with a heroine you can’t help rooting for. Readers will laugh, wince, and cheer as Pippa writes the next (blank?) chapter of her career, navigates the pain of betrayal, and seizes the happiness she deserves.”

—Jane Roper, author of *The Society of Shame*

“Zibby Owens is a tremendous champion for writers, and it’s thrilling to see her own storytelling shine in this smart debut novel about marriage, motherhood, and finding your purpose. *Blank* is a

romp through the publishing world and a delightful gift to book lovers.”

—Carley Fortune, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *Meet Me at the Lake* and *Every Summer After*

“I read it in one sitting, and loved it. *Blank* has Zibby’s inimitable voice, of course, and she also has told a story which feels like a parable not only of her own story, in ways, but of publishing, which is to say a novel that dovetails with the movement she herself has built, inspiring women to tell their stories, inspiring authors to tear down old walls.”

—Lea Carpenter, author of *Ilium*, *Eleven Days*, and *Red, White, Blue*

BLANK

ALSO BY PIPPA JONES

Poppies: A Novel

Also by Zibby Owens

Bookends: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Literature

Princess Charming

Moms Don't Have Time to Have Kids: A Timeless Anthology

Moms Don't Have Time To: A Quarantine Anthology

BLANK

A NOVEL

**ZIBBY
OWENS**

Little
a

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, institutions, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2024 by Zibby Owens
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Little A, New York
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Little A are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662516696 (hardcover)
ISBN-13: 9781662516702 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 9781662511196 (digital)

Cover design by Tree Abraham

First edition

To Max. Next time I'll have the chocolate chip pancakes ready.

—Mom, aka Pippa Jones

To G. C. R. Next time I'll have the chocolate chip pancakes ready.

—Mom, aka Zibby Owens

CONTENTS

MONDAY

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

TUESDAY

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

WEDNESDAY

Fifteen

Sixteen

THURSDAY

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

Twenty-Seven

Twenty-Eight

Twenty-Nine

FRIDAY

Thirty

Thirty-One

Thirty-Two

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[SATURDAY](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[SEVERAL MONTHS LATER](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . FROM PIPPA](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . FROM ZIBBY](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

MONDAY

One

Mom, look!”

“Zoe? Are you okay?”

It was the middle of the night and I’d just woken up to a cellphone being shoved in front of my face. Great. Now I’d never fall back asleep. Well, at least I could start writing early.

“I told you they were getting together! See? I knew he didn’t like me.”

“What time is it?” I struggled to sit up in the dark.

“Look! See his hand on her back?”

“Whose hand?”

“Just look!”

I fumbled for and grabbed my reading glasses off the stack of books on my bedside table, slid them on, and looked at the Instagram post of two canoodling teens. When the kids were little, I was sure my sleepless nights would soon be over for good. Not a chance. At age fifteen, Zoe still seemed to have no grasp of the distinction between night and day and the fact that other people needed to sleep. Or maybe she just didn’t care? Plus, now that they could sleep, I couldn’t. Aging is so much fun.

“Okay, fine. Yes. It looks like they’re together.”

She gasped.

“It looks like they’re *together*?”

“Yes, isn’t that what you wanted me to say?”

“NO! I wanted you to tell me I was being crazy, that Todd was still into *me*.”

I sighed, tossed my glasses on the books, and fell back on my pillow.

“I can’t win. Why even ask me? I think I told my mother about literally *one* boy I liked at your age.”

“Well, I wouldn’t tell Gee-Gee anything either.”

My mother, Joan, was a character, deeply consumed with her own *mishigas*. She was perpetually clad in Palm Springs mid-century-modern caftans, ice clinking in a lowball glass as she wandered from room to room. Her two chihuahuas were always scampering after her, my stepfather, Seymour, not too far behind.

“Could the two of you just be quiet,” Ethan groaned. “Zoe, no one’s ever going to like you and you’ll die alone. Is that what you want us to say?”

I pretend-smacked Ethan. Perhaps a little too hard.

“Ouch!”

“Da-aaad!”

“Zoe, he’s kidding. But go back to bed. Please. Get some rest, sweetie. You have school tomorrow.”

“Fine, but I’m commenting on this post so the two of them know I know.”

“Look, if this guy Todd isn’t into you, he’s a moron,” Ethan said. “You should just move on. His loss.”

Now that my eyes had adjusted to the dark, I could see Zoe stomping out in her favorite tie-dye T-shirt and influencer-famous joggers, twisting her long, stick-straight light-brown hair into a messy bun. Usually she wore giant sweatshirts (all styles were inexplicably referred to as “hoodies”) to hide her petite, athletic body. The swooshing sounds of outgoing text messages trailed her down the hallway.

“We should take that phone away,” Ethan mumbled.

“Mmm,” I said, pulling the covers back up. “You’re right.”

Ethan rolled over and was snoring again within seconds. *How is that even physically possible?* I glanced over and saw the top of his familiar, faded blue-and-white-striped jammies, worn almost translucent over the years. He refused to replace them. Why waste money?

His formerly thick, wavy brown hair was now infused with a few shocks of gray and was thinning, not that we could ever acknowledge it to each other. I just kept sweeping the hairs off the bathroom floor, the pillows, even the toilet seat. After seventeen years together, I knew which “buttons” of his to avoid pushing. His blue eyes, now closed, were paired with seriously long and highly enviable eyelashes that our son, Max, had inherited—along with his dimples. Not that Ethan had smiled much lately.

I sighed deeply, my eyes open like a cat in the nighttime even though I knew I should be sleeping. *I knew it;* I was wide awake and it was only 3:14 a.m. I scanned the ceiling for cracks as I went back to worrying about my book.

My novel was three *years* overdue. *Years!* How could I possibly follow up *Poppies* with something I was proud of? *Poppies*, my debut novel about an heiress forced to navigate the 2008 housing crisis by selling all her Hermès purses and uniting a tribe of underutilized women, had been an unexpected bestseller. And then it was made into a film and won an Academy Award. For best sound mixing, yes, but whatever. *Poppies* had become a cult hit among a certain social set, and in Hollywood currency, I’d made it.

“A slam dunk from a debut author,” claimed *Vanity Fair*. “Pippa Jones is the voice of a generation!”

Sales sped along, women toting their Birkins to readings, tittering about the plot in their book clubs for which they’d each bought two copies because *why not?* It was enough for my book to earn out its admittedly meager advance and start paying me “royalties,” a few cents for every book sold, which really added up. It added up enough, that is, for me to finally pay for highlights instead of dipping into Ethan’s savings from his career as a child actor, a rapidly draining pot. (Ethan had told me long ago that “his wife going gray” wasn’t something he’d be “cool” with, despite the dwindling strands atop his head.)

My longtime literary agent, LeeLee, had been thrilled by the success of *Poppies*. At least I *think* she was thrilled. Her face didn’t move that much with all the fillers. When she smiled, she looked like some sort of frozen fish trying to escape from a net. A blonde net. Not that it mattered, because I almost never saw her in person. She definitely *sounded* happy when she called from her vintage Saab to tell me *Poppies* had hit the *New York Times* bestseller list (“the list”). But my bespectacled, tattooed New York editor, Sidonie, had been truly over the moon from day one. She’d dreamed of it being optioned and made into a movie starring one-named celebrities I’d never heard of.

“*Sireneuse! Mayhew! Persephone!*”

May-who?! When did everyone get so young and famous? Sidonie and her wife, the Australian guitarist Jade, had sat in the front row of the premiere.

Naturally.

But now the dust had settled. After the movie left theaters, my publisher, Driftwood, basically forgot about me. One of their other titles had been chosen as a big book club pick, and the third book from one of their beloved thriller authors was coming out. Yes, my hit was great. But it was a single; I hadn't proven myself with a home run yet. And, apparently, it wasn't enough to keep their eyes on me.

But that's what happens in publishing. Today's darling quickly becomes tomorrow's doorstop. And those authors whose books came out and barely sold? Forget it. Of course, many of those overlooked books are amazing. Spectacular, even. Like a lost child at a crowded festival, a debut novelist could simply disappear, blending in with the background. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that talent didn't equate success, that some wildly popular authors weren't the best at their craft, whereas some gifted novelists sold, like, two copies of their book. To their parents.

Poppies disappeared from the list like a one-night stand slinking out the door the next morning, still buckling his belt. The fireworks had dissolved into mere clouds of smoke. All the excited emails from Brittany, my publicist, had stopped coming in except for a few errant newbie podcasters tossing their hats in the PR ring.

"Never say no!" Brittany advised.

Nobody cared about *Poppies*, or me, anymore. They were on to the next big thing. *Hot summer reads! Lily Opum's new novel! The film adaptation of The Grasshopper!* I was yesterday's news. Not even. Like, last decade's news. Unless I could write myself back into the narrative, I was destined to be a one-hit wonder. I wouldn't have minded as much if we had, well, everlasting financial security. But with Ethan's theater producer job not exactly bringing in the big bucks—there are, like, three plays a *year* in LA—and with my writing stalling, it was tough paying two private-school tuitions and everything else. I mean, I guess I didn't *have* to send them to private school. The advance on my new book from three years ago? Poof. I'd used it to turn the kitchen pantry into my writing office.

Thanks to Ethan's residual income, we could lead our very privileged upper-middle-class life, but we were toeing the line constantly, spending heavily on all the trappings seemingly required of it (Summer camp! School auction! Vacations!) that hit us hard. We didn't have endless reserves like many of our peers, and despite how fortunate we were, there was always an undercurrent of tension. My writing income helped, but one book wouldn't cut it to maintain this lifestyle forever. When would it run out? And what then?

I turned onto my side and curled into a ball, my arms hugging my knees to my chest. My eyes were wide open like I'd just had a jolt of epinephrine. Should I read? And, wait, what was that on Ethan's pillow? I inched closer to his side, propped myself up on my elbow, and examined the many hairs that had taken up residence on his pillow. The hair loss must be killing him. And yet he was plenty happy weighing in on my hair color. Really. The nerve! Honestly, I didn't care. I just didn't love the whole double standard thing. And yes. Those were his hairs alright. He looked so sweet when he was asleep. If only it would stay that way.

Tossing and turning wasn't helping anything. I was just getting more anxious.

Okay, time for a quick Instagram check. What was everyone else up to? And how was my account doing? Or rather, accounts. I imagined throngs of women my age underneath the

covers in the dead of night, scrolling mindlessly. Many of us used to be up at this hour nursing, comforting crying kids, depositing errant dollar bills as tooth fairies. Now we were all awake, our kids out cold in messy rooms down the hall, our minds spinning, hormones toying with us. “Oh yeah? You think you can sleep *now*?” they taunted.

I’d started doing something else, something secret, salacious, and totally time-consuming. I’d launched an underground Instagram account documenting the hidden parts of luxurious houses on the market in LA. *That* kind of writing I could do easily. Captions! Pithy! Fun!

Like Ruth Reichl was for restaurants—anonously dining in disguise to review the latest hot spots—I was the undercover real estate whisperer. If there was an open house in the LA area, I was there. Taking pictures. Posting. Adding funny comments. Real estate brokers often joked about “me.” I’d even been called out on the hit reality show *Brentwood Brokers*. One real estate agent said to the other, “I hope @openhousebandit doesn’t strike again. I *need* people to love my new listing!”

I’d watched that episode on the couch next to Ethan, who was busy on his phone the whole time, and exclaimed, “No WAY!” pitching forward to get closer to the screen.

“What?” Ethan had asked, not looking up.

“Nothing, nothing,” I’d said, sinking back. But it was amazing. I just smiled to myself and kept watching, pulling the cozy cream chenille blanket on top of me. If only I could monetize *that* without revealing my identity.

For whatever reason, I loved sneaking into strangers’ homes, trying to figure out their stories. My old therapist would’ve had a field day with that: searching for a home given my own fractured family.

But boy, was I a sucker for wallpaper. Turned out I wasn’t the only one obsessed. My 710K followers watched my every move. I didn’t tell *anyone* it was me. Not Ethan, not my kids. Not even Kelly, Gabriela, and Josie, my three best friends from college. We still talked all the time and got together once a month for virtual book club. It was the only thing that made me feel like *me* when every other part of me was wrapped up in being a wife, mom, daughter, nonwriting author, and former big deal. Who else was I? Apparently, a witty luxury-home connoisseur who could spot a four-bedroom with space for a powder room from a mile away.

Two

Blink. Blink, blink.
Have you ever *really* thought about the cursor? I texted Kelly. **Why does it have to blink like that?**

Three dots.

Oh boy. That kind of writing day?

Can't you just hear horror music playing in the background as it slowly tolls the death knell?

The 5:00 a.m. writing session had not gone well. Of course, I hadn't been able to fall back asleep. I'd stood at the Keurig, watching the drips of my creative fuel plop into my favorite mug with the *Moms Don't Have Time to Read Books* podcast logo. So true! Moms don't even have time to read school emails let alone entire books. Although I tried to always read our book club pick.

Gripping the ceramic mug with two hands, bypassing the handle, I put on my writing slippers—one said "Don't," the other said "Trip"—pulled up the hood of my favorite blue sweatshirt, and shuffled to my desk. Then, I opened the top drawer and pulled out one of the forty-seven single-serving packets of chocolate-covered almonds I'd stockpiled from Starbucks (they were hard to find, so I splurged when they were in stock) and sat down on my yellow upholstered chair, wheeling it up to the computer. I closed out of all tabs so nothing would distract me and opened the Word document. Then I took a deep breath, perched my fingers over the keys like a pianist about to pounce, and then . . . nothing.

Another text came in from Kelly on the East Coast.

You need sleep.

True.

My new "office" off the kitchen was a mishmash of books, magazines, bills, boxes, and discarded coffee mugs. I anxiously started texting back.

It's like a ticking time bomb. A heartbeat.

Just stop, Kelly replied. **Face the fear. Just get in the document.**

Easy for you to say, I wrote back. **Miss I'm-on-page-367-of-my-57th-thriller.**

F off.

Kelly, Gabriela, Josie, and I had found each other in the school newspaper office freshman year at Bluestone University. We'd *all* wanted to be writers back then. Surrounded by stacks of yellowing papers, racks of leather-bound books, and even a few old typewriters, we were the only women among a sea of wannabe Woodwards and Bernsteins.

"So, you all think you're gonna be journalists?" said Alex, the preppy senior and managing editor of the *Bluesheet*. "By the end of the day, half of you will have rethought your decision."

Huh? What is this?!

I'd quickly glanced at the three girls, catching the eye of the brunette on my left. She shrugged, then began taking down notes.

"Your assignment," Alex went on, walking in slow circles around us seated newbies, "is to break a story about a building on campus. Find the hidden meaning. The secrets. The lies."

He bent down and looked a tall Black girl in the eye.

"All of it."

She leaned back as far as possible in her chair. Then she looked over at us, her eyes wide. Gorgeous and almost six feet tall, she didn't seem easily intimidated.

"Put a thousand words of copy on my desk, printed, by nine a.m. tomorrow. Good luck." Alex stood, hands on hips, nodding. "You'll need it," he said, chuckling to himself. Then he tucked his white polo shirt tighter into his Nantucket reds and retreated back into the newsroom.

I'd looked at the three other women, all of us stunned into silence, and said, "The glee club is sounding pretty good right about now."

We all stood up and introduced ourselves.

"I'm Kelly, from New York." Kelly had straight, thin, shoulder-length, white-blonde hair; a trace of freckles; superlong eyelashes; and a narrow face with a tight smile. At five foot two, her body was lean and tiny. Yet tough. Although her parents had pushed her to be a ballerina or a figure skater, Kelly had been drawn to martial arts and fallen for the far-less-feminine jujitsu. She'd never forgiven her parents for forbidding her from going to the regional competitions; she knew she could have crushed them.

The Black girl waved to our circle with a little knee bend and a smile.

"Josie. Chicago. Nice to meet you."

Josie's hair was pulled back in a bun, and her smooth tawny skin offset dark, soulful, shining eyes set a tad farther apart than expected. She could have been a model—her limbs flowing, her posture perfectly upright, whereas I was always slumped over. She'd found her calling in ballet and then modern dance, dressed in black unitards with cat's-eye makeup, moving melodiously through various poses to percussive, gong-filled music. Her observational nature and comfort with her body drew her to other cultural outlets, and before she knew it, she'd become the Arts & Culture editor of her high school newspaper and even had a radio show with a classmate discussing politics and current events with her astute, brilliant remarks. It was no huge shock when, after earning her stripes at every local news network in the US years later, she eventually became a renowned correspondent. Single. Stunning but not aware of it. Accomplished.

"I'm Gabriela. From Venezuela." Gabriela looked like an athlete; her black tank top accentuated her broad shoulders, narrow waist, and toned biceps. I'd later learn that she was overweight as a child until she discovered all types of sports—especially competitive swimming, for which she'd been recruited to Bluestone. She was striking looking, like Anjelica Huston, with very full lips, a narrow nose, and dark-brown hair with bangs. But it was her fabulous sense of humor that had always attracted everyone to her side of the room.

And me?

I preferred to be called "a natural beauty," not that anyone was really calling me that. I was a bit mousy. Pale despite the constant sunshine in my hometown of LA. A quick wit, yes, but a nondescript outer edge. I often looked like what my mother classified as "not making an effort." I was usually in jeans, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. I had an Ashkenazi vibe,

with an oval face, high cheekbones, lips that didn't require lipstick, a normal-size nose, and some errant beauty marks that I had debated getting removed. I typically had a chipped manicure or none at all and wavy (read: frizzy) hair that attracted humidity like a barometer and required a superpowered hair dryer. And yet somehow it all worked together.

"Hi, ladies. I'm Pippa. I'm from LA," I said, smiling. "Anyone ready to hunt for some secrets?"

"Um, not me," Josie answered.

"Same," Kelly added.

"Forget this assignment! Seriously. What was *with* that guy?!" said Gabriela. "How about we head to a bookstore and grab some coffee instead?"

We all walked straight to the Bluestone Coop and browsed the aisles together. I stood, feet planted, in the memoir section. Josie read every hardcover flap in the history and biography area. Kelly browsed the thrillers, while Gabriela checked out the Spanish-language section. We all loved books more than anything, certainly more than any of the boys we would meet over the next four years.

We'd been through a lot together since those early days. Boyfriends. Weddings. Kids. Job changes. Josie's mom's car accident. Kelly's dad's lung cancer scare. Gabriela's affairs. Family dramas. Grad schools.

Life.

Kelly didn't give up on journalism that day, though. She'd go on to found *Hi-YA!*, now the world's leading martial arts magazine, and then sell it to Condé Nast. She met her husband, Arthur, a sumo wrestler turned finance whiz, when she interviewed him for a piece on weight-gain hacks and fell deeply in love. They ended up with three perfectly coiffed, towheaded, tae-kwon-do-champion, private-school kids in New York and a membership at the exclusive country club in Southampton that her father and grandfather had belonged to.

She left the print media world after her magazine was acquired, only to start whipping out mind-bending, twisty, coveted reads set in the martial arts world. The novels focused on the various forms, from karate to Krav Maga; she sold them at tournaments until a few postings on popular martial arts handles made them go viral. For the last twelve years, every single one had been a bestseller. And yes, I kind of hated her for it. Not that I would ever admit it. Her husband had dropped three hundred pounds on Atkins, gone to business school, and become a hedge fund guru as founder of Sumo Capital. They were fixtures in the charity circuit, always the most interesting dinner party conversationalists.

I didn't know how Kelly did it all. Holiday cards that arrived the day after Thanksgiving with a photo of her identically dressed kids, shelves of trophies behind them. Thoughtful flowers that showed up on my birthday each year. Elegantly wrapped presents for all the kids' big days. (I could barely remember my own kids' birthdays, let alone someone else's. And holiday cards? Late or never.) And in her spare time, Kelly played the flute. I mean, *come on*.

Look, Kelly texted, **just write what you know. Don't be so precious about it. Write about me! Gabriela! Josie. Our book club. Whatever. Just get into the document.**

Okay, okay, I texted back. **Thanks.**

We sent each other heart emojis. Maybe I could write about heart emojis? *How to make that interesting* . . . Maybe what happens when someone sends the wrong person a salacious emoji? I spent the early-morning hours writing scene after scene, pausing only to get a fresh cup of coffee. And then, right before waking up the kids, I read it all back. It was

terrible. Unsalvageable. Embarrassing.

Select all.

Delete.

Moms don't have time to write terrible drafts.

Wasted morning writing. Don't even ask, I texted Kelly as I walked upstairs to wake the kids. **What were we supposed to read for book club again tonight? I'm pretty sure I read it, but now I forget. I swear I'm losing my mind.**

No writing is a waste! And the book assignments are in the Google Doc.

My Google Docs disappear, I wrote back. **For some reason I can never find them again after opening them once. Where do they go?! I should write a book called The Mysterious Disappearance of the Google Doc.**

We're reading Writers & Lovers by Lily King. And no, you should not write that book. Have to run. The kids are making egg white omelets for breakfast and I promised I'd watch. Check the Google Drive!

Her kids were making omelets. Meanwhile my kids needed me to pour Honey Nut Cheerios in a bowl for them.

I sighed deeply and texted again: **Google Drive is even worse than Google Docs. Maybe my Google Drive got into a car accident. It got lost. It got its driver's license revoked.**

Okay, you have to stop. Not funny.

I laughed.

Love you.



Three

Time to get up! Guys? Wakey, wakey! It's already time to leave!"

I was standing at the top of the bleached-wood stairs, admiring the blue-and-white sisal runner from Overstock while rousing Zoe and Max. They were going to be late for school. Again.

"Seriously. Guys! Come on!" I knocked on both their doors.

Zoe opened hers and gave me a quick hug; she basically just hugged my left shoulder. Pink hair extensions were braided through her long locks, which she'd swept into a high pony. A black crop top left her waist exposed, her belly button peeking out above her jeans, finished off with an open oversize hoodie and Air Force Ones.

"You can't say 'guys' anymore," she said, and headed downstairs, stomping so loudly I thought the wood might crack.

"What? Seriously?"

Max came running out of his room. Small for his age, he seemed to be half the size of his backpack. He hunched over from the weight of it.

"Hi, love," I said as he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Is that true? I'm not supposed to say 'guys' anymore?"

He shrugged.

"No one tells me anything," he answered, his just pubescent voice cracking a bit as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

We headed downstairs together to find Zoe in the kitchen staring at her phone. "Let's grab a quick breakfast for the road. We're late. What do you two want?"

No one answered. As I opened the fridge to grab some yogurt pouches, I glanced around the room. I *loved* our kitchen. Open glass cabinets with plain white CB2 plates and mugs. Forest-green cabinets. A beautiful green-and-brown jaguar-print wallpaper as an accent on one wall. A huge island with three sturdy wood and leather stools. Sunlight pouring in through the skylight.

A+ kitchen with natural light, ample storage, a dishwasher, two sinks, and a six-burner range. It was our home's main selling point when I'd scanned the listing. And the Pacific Palisades location couldn't be beat; the ocean was only ten minutes away. Ethan's residual income from reruns of his show backed the mortgage we'd taken out. I stepped into the flip-flops I'd left by the door; grabbed a banana, my sunglasses, and the car keys; and headed out with the kids following me, barely looking up from their phones.

"You know, Mom, it's really not good to eat on the go. We're all supposed to sit down and be mindful of what we're eating," Zoe said. *Classic.* One minute she was waking me up in a panic about the doomed state of her love life; the next she was lecturing me on proper eating habits. *Oh, the joys of parenting a teenager.*

"Yes, I know that, love. Thank you," I said. "But sometimes *not* being perfect is okay,