

# SOMETHING **REAL**

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[www.metareel.com/bakersdozen/cast](http://www.metareel.com/bakersdozen/cast)

Click on a name below to find out more about each member of the Baker family! Don't forget to check out the Baker blog [here](#).

#### THE PARENTS:

[Beth Baker-Miller](#)

Hometown: Bartlett, New Hampshire

[Kirk Miller](#)

Hometown: Fresno, California

#### THE KIDS:

[Bonnie™ Baker](#)

Age: 17

Country: USA (biological child)

[Benton™ Baker](#)

Age: 17

Country: USA (surrogate mother)

[Lexie™ Baker](#)

Age: 17

Country: USA (surrogate mother)

[Farrow™ Baker](#)

Age: 15

Country: Ethiopia (Adopted)

[Riley™ Baker](#)

Age: 14

Country: Cambodia (Adopted)

[Gavin™ Baker](#)

Age: 13

Country: Peru (Adopted)

[Tristan™ Baker](#)

Age: 12

Country: Russia (Adopted)

[DeShaun™ Baker](#)

Age: 10

Country: USA (Adopted through foster care)

<u>Deston™ Baker</u>	Age: 9	Country: USA (Adopted through foster care)
<u>Lark™ Baker</u>	Age: 8	Country: India (Adopted)
<u>Daisy™ Baker</u>	Age: 7	Country: China (Adopted)
<u>Violet™ Baker</u>	Age: 7	Country: China (Adopted)
<u>Jasmine™ Baker</u>	Age: 7	Country: China (Adopted)

Click [here](#) for more information about former cast member **Andrew Baker** (seasons 1–13).

## SEASON 17, EPISODE 1

*(The One with the Cameras)*



It took me four years, seven shrinks, three different hair colors, one Zen meditation retreat, and over six hundred mochas to get to this moment.

I step up to the blue velvet backdrop and face the camera. When the photographer isn't paying attention, I wipe the back of my hand over my damp forehead, then clutch my fingers behind my back, like I'm a two-year-old with a secret. I shouldn't have worn the sweater-shirt. The wool is itchy, and I'm about two seconds away from breaking out in hives. God, why won't he just take the damn picture? It's not like this is *Seventeen*. The last time they shot me, we'd spent four hours on my hair and makeup and another three in front of the camera. This is nothing compared to that, but it feels so much worse.

I want to bolt so bad, and this guy's taking forever, longer than he took for anyone who was in line ahead of me. But I have to stick it out. I've been psyching myself up for this all summer. A senior photo is an important pastime for a normal girl. And I'm a normal girl.

Finally.

I can do this. *Breathe*. It's not even a *camera* camera . . . it's just a photo. One photo. That's it. And the name that will be underneath it in the yearbook? Totally unremarkable. Nothing *Us Weekly* would care about. Chloe Baker's a nobody.

The scruffy photographer crouches down behind the camera, like a sniper looking through a scope. The panic that had started out as a slight queasiness in my stomach is pushing past my ribs, pressing against my lungs.

The sweater itching. Sweat on my forehead. Nails digging into my skin. *Keep it together. Just a few more seconds.*

I'm a freaking basket case.

"All right, Chloe," he says. "On three. One, two—"

I smile as the flash goes off, and the photographer gives me a thumbs-up, then turns to the kid behind him. "Next!"

My first voluntary picture in four years.

I grab my backpack off the floor and throw it over one shoulder as I walk out of the makeshift photo studio. Giddiness wells up in me, like I mainlined a Pepsi Freeze and got a little too high on caffeine and sugar. I want to do something to commemorate the day—bake a cake or put a sticker on my calendar. Light a candle.

Behind me, a long line of seniors wait their turn for the yearbook photos, but since my last name is at the beginning of the alphabet, I'm among the first to go home on this rare half day. Thank God for long faculty meetings.

"Proud of you, sis."

My brother, Benton™, also a senior, gives me a hug. I knew he'd been waiting for me after he took his photo, which, because he's a well-adjusted person, is no biggie for him.

“Is that relief I see in your eyes?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Maybe a little.”

“Someday, you’ll be proud of me for doing something that’s scarier than a yearbook picture.”

He gives my ponytail an affectionate tug. “Baby steps.” We walk away from the line together and then he jerks his thumb toward the locker room. “I’m meeting Matt, so you can take the car, ‘kay?”

“Have fun.”

He gives me a wicked little grin. “We get his house to ourselves until he has practice at three.”

I feign shock. “Scandalous!”

He laughs and then jogs off to meet his boyfriend, while I go the opposite way, toward the parking lot.

Maybe not freaking out is proof that I’m no longer a paranoid schizo. I mean, if my classmates haven’t figured it out by now, they never will. Right? Right. It doesn’t matter if they look at me all day long or have ten yearbook pictures of me. It doesn’t. They’ll only see *Chloe Baker*.

Still. A tiny part of me wants to turn around and demand that the photographer delete my photo. It isn’t too late. But I keep walking, one foot in front of the other, out of the gym, through the parking lot, and to the car Benny and I share—a used silver Hyundai with dark-tinted windows, as unremarkable as I want to be.

It’s one of those rare perfect fall days that we only get, like, three of in central California. The sun is shining, but the breeze bites, and even though the trees don’t really change here, not like back home in New Hampshire, a few across the parking lot have turned golden or rust-colored. I smile at them, like we’re old friends. Then I slide into the driver’s seat, and when I turn the key, the radio

starts blaring Lily Allen's "Smile," and really, how freakin' perfect is that?

My cell rings, and I put it on speaker as I back out of my spot.

"Chlo. You still coming over?" It's Tessa, one of my two best friends.

"Yeah," I say. "Just going home to change. This sweater makes me want to rip my skin off."

"Yikes." I can hear the heavy buzz of students all around her—her last name's Lee, so she'll be in line for a while. "Well, don't hurry. After this, I have to make sure the paper's good to go. There are about five articles that I know right now, without the benefit of psychic powers, are going to suck."

Tessa is the editor of the school paper, and it pretty much takes up her whole life. It sort of works out that my friends are super-busy overachievers—it gives them less time to ask questions I can't answer.

"Don't you have underclassmen minions to do your bidding?" I say. "Make someone else proofread for a change. It's a half day!"

I pull out of the parking lot and head north, toward the highway that leads to the new housing developments out in the boonies.

"Can't. The paper's my baby. Leaving it in their hands is like child endangerment," Tessa says. "Call you when I'm done?"

"Sounds good."

I hang up and sing along with Lily Allen, reveling in the noon sun. Now that the photo's over, I can't wipe the smile off my face. I'm tempted to call my therapist from last year and be like, *I'm cured!!* but I wouldn't want to give her the satisfaction. She always used the phrase "that's understandable" whenever I told her about the stuff that happened to me, and I was like, *No, actually, none of it's*



*understandable. That's sort of the whole point of why I'm here.* But like everything else, that's in the past.

Twenty minutes later, I slow down in front of the big metal gate that leads into our driveway. It's exactly like the one we had in New Hampshire four years ago—built so that paparazzi can't see in. I press the control attached to my sun visor, and the gate creaks open. As soon as I pull into the drive, my good mood is gone, like someone came over and kicked it out of me. I hit the brakes and stare.

The telltale signs of my childhood are everywhere: vans with satellite dishes on top, the Mercedes with the familiar BRN4REEL license plate, and ropes of thick black cables that crawl around the house like prehistoric predators, squeezing everyone inside until they suffocate.

The living room curtains are closed. Hot lights seem to burn up everything on the other side of them, the fluorescent quality of the inside mixing with the sunlight outside.

As if the two could coexist.

This is the moment where I'm supposed to visualize something positive. Go to my happy place. Meditate. Instead, I just sit there, numb, with the car running, and try to remember how to breathe. This can't be possible—not when I'm finally in school and have friends and can go to the mall without Vultures hiding in planters, stalking me. Mom promised. She fucking *promised*.

But a voice inside whispers, *Yeah, Bonnie™, but parents break their promises—you know that better than anyone else.*

I close my eyes and beg the universe to pleasepleaseplease let this be a really extreme flashback. It's not real. Not real. Not.

I open my eyes—this is really happening.

The car feels suddenly small, like the metal sides are warping and shrinking. My sweater-shirt is full of millions of little teeth eating away at me, and I struggle with my seat belt as beads of sweat pile up under my bra, against the tight waistline of my jeans, and trickle down my forehead. Dammit, this seat belt won't freaking open, it won't—

Two guys on the roof stare down at me as I stumble out of the car, and I know they're surveying the neighborhood, seeing if there are any good shots they can get from up there. A crew is already working on making our fence even higher, and security details are mapping out the perimeter of our property. Five hours ago, they weren't here. They were probably driving up from LA just as I was leaving for school. Funny how your whole world can go to hell within three hundred minutes.

"Excuse me," someone calls, "didn't you see the sign? This is private property."

I turn around and shade my eyes against the sun as an unfamiliar figure walks up to me.

"Yeah, I know," I say. The woman has a cell phone in one hand and a Starbucks cup in the other. I've never seen her before. "My stepdad put up that sign. Who are you?"

As she gets closer, she gasps. "OMG! Bonnie™?" A look of recognition passes over her face. "It is you. Wow! You look like a totally different person! I love, love, *love* your long hair—so different from that cute little bob you always had, and the color—awesome. Oh my gosh, you were, like, my little sister's *idol*. For reals, she is going to FLIP when she sees how grown up you are. This is so freakin' out of control!"

She! Loves! Exclamation! Points!

"Who *are* you?"

“Oops!” She flips her hair back like she’s in a shampoo commercial. “Sorry. I’m Lacey—the head production assistant for *Baker’s Dozen: Fresh Batch*.”

I already hate Lacey Production Assistant Who Talks to Me Like She Knows Me.

“*Fresh Batch?*”

My tongue feels thick, and the words come out sounding like I’ve been drugged. My stomach gets that car sickness sort of feeling, and the world begins to tip on its axis, vertigo style.

Just then, Mom and Chuck come out the front door—Chuck of BRN4REEL fame, MetaReel’s head producer. He hasn’t changed a bit. His paunch strains against his shirt, and he walks toward me like a strutting peacock, his weight on his heels, his arms swinging freely at his sides. Lacey scurries away, and two seconds later I realize why; she doesn’t want to get in the shot. My hands fly up to block my face—my kingdom for a pair of dark sunglasses and a ginormous hat.

“Mom! What is this?” I shout. The last word echoes across our huge driveway, *this . . . this . . . this*.

I can feel eyes on me—the camera, the dudes on the roof, the crew peeking out the windows of my house.

“Bonnie™, why aren’t you in school?”

Mom’s out of practice—back in the day, she would have been able to hide the note of panic that’s creeping into her voice. To her credit, she has a super-stricken look on her face, but right now I hate her more than Lacey Production Assistant.

“Who cares? What’s going on?”

“Bonnie™,” she says, pursing her lips and inclining her head ever so slightly toward the camera.

As if I could forget it’s there.

Chuck's small, glittering eyes are on us, but he hangs back, letting the cameras take in all our drama. There's a movement to my right, and I see three little pigtailed heads peering out at me through the slightly open front door—my youngest sisters, our triplets from China: Daisy™, Violet™, and Jasmine™. I was hoping they wouldn't have the childhood I did, but I guess they will after all.

"Mom, *please*—" I stop because my voice is getting that high, constricted I'm-trying-not-to-cry sound, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give the cameras what they want. Also, I don't want to freak out my sisters.

Mom looks at me—really looks at me—and her eyes are sad and stressed, and I think how much they look like my brother Benny's. Then she squeezes the tip of her nose between her thumb and index finger, which is Mom Speak for *shitshitshit*. She turns to Chuck.

"We can't film this—we agreed Kirk and I would get to tell all the kids in a controlled environment. I told you it would be difficult with her. I told you, Chuck."

The camera focuses on me as Chuck whispers in Mom's ear. She starts shaking her head.

"I don't care!"

My feet start moving on their own, closer and closer to the camera. I barely register the guy holding it. I reach out my hand and touch the glass lens—nobody's really paying attention to me anymore except for the camera and the man behind it. You know those tribal people who believed a camera could steal your soul? Turns out they were right.

"I'm sorry, Beth. It's in the contract—MetaReel has full access to all public spheres of the home. The driveway is a public sphere. What do you want me to do?" Chuck asks. I can see him reflected in the

lens, giving his little shrug and faux it's-out-of-my-hands frown. It's an expression better suited to a sitcom. He loves playing hapless—he's anything but.

"Bon-Bon, come over here," Chuck says, his voice wheedling. "Four years, and I don't even get a hug?"

I can't believe I used to like that nickname.

"Bonnie™," Mom calls. I can hear her heels grinding the gravel underfoot as she comes after me. *Hurry, hurry*, my blood whispers.

I look right into the camera. My face is practically pressed up against it. America will be able to see my smudged eyeliner and the zit on my chin. They'll probably show a Cover Girl commercial after this segment—I'll be a cautionary tale for teen skin care.

I open my mouth to say something—*screw you, America!*—anything, but I go mute. Typical.

Mom yanks me back, hard. Child Protective Services hard.

"Ouch!" I say it louder than I need to.

The front door opens wider, and Kirk, my stepdad, comes outside. His sandy gray hair is slicked back, and he's wearing pressed khakis and a button-down. He looks like a totally different person without the paint-splattered Dickies and ratty T-shirts he usually wears.

"Bonnie™, sweetheart. Let your mother explain," he says.

For a second, I just stand there and stare at him. *Bonnie™—et tu*, Kirk? I feel like he just walked onto the porch and slapped my face as hard as he could. Up until about three seconds ago, he was one of only two people in my whole family who were willing to call me Chloe. He'd understood why the name Bonnie™ was repulsive to me. He'd said he wouldn't want to be a brand, either. But now he's sauntering toward us, relaxed—like he's having fun. I look from Mom's

perfect hair to his easy grin; this was always going to happen again, wasn't it? Stupid, *stupid* me.

"Bonnie™, go inside." Mom's still holding my arm, and I can almost feel my skin bruising underneath it, turning me purple. I shake her off, but she doesn't notice. She and Chuck are having a staring contest.

I give the camera one more glare before I jump back in my car. The keys are still in the ignition, so I peel out of the driveway James Bond style, ignoring my mother's shouts and the coffee that Lacey Production Assistant has dropped onto the front of her shirt in her haste not to die.

I can't believe it. Despite all her promises, my mom has finally given in to MetaReel. After four camera-free years, the cast of *Baker's Dozen*—my family—is back on the air.

## Fireside Chats with Kaye Gibbons

**INT-BAKER HOME-NIGHT:** A cozy living room with a fire burning in a fireplace. Thirteen framed photos are set up on the mantel. Three of them are empty. [KAYE sits in a wingback chair beside the fire, ankles crossed. Her bob is hair-sprayed to perfection, and she wears a mint suit.]

**KAYE GIBBONS:** Good afternoon and welcome to another episode of *Fireside Chats With Kaye Gibbons*. Ten years ago, America—and the world—opened up their hearts to a very special family. For the past 3,600 days, we've shared in their joys [CUT to image of couple in a hospital delivery room holding a baby] and their sorrows [CUT to picture of orphanage destroyed by an earthquake. CUT to KAYE GIBBONS]. Though their circumstances are extraordinary, and they have millions of fans all over the country [CUT to image of a packed book-signing, then CUT to KAYE GIBBONS], not to mention a number of highly successful product lines, they're still just as down-to-earth as when we met them. Today we have an extra

special *Fireside Chat* with Beth and Andrew Baker, and—of course—little Bonnie™, Benton™, Lexie™, Farrow™, Riley™, Gavin™, Tristan™, DeShaun™, Deston™, and Lark™, stars of the hit MetaReel reality show, *Baker's Dozen*. To celebrate the show's tenth anniversary, I'm here at their beautiful five-acre property in Bartlett, New Hampshire, where they live, work, and play. Beth and Andrew have agreed to take a few minutes out of their busy home life to tell us why thirteen is still their lucky number.

[The BAKER FAMILY enters the room, and they arrange themselves around the fireplace. BETH and ANDREW sit in wingback chairs across from KAYE. BETH holds a baby boy and sets a stroller holding two toddlers beside her as ANDREW wrangles two little boys on either knee. The other five children alternately sit or walk around the room. One, BONNIE™, approaches KAYE and gives her a hug.]

**KAYE GIBBONS:** Well, hello there. I know you! Bonnie™, you have gotten so big since the last time I came to visit!

**BONNIE™:** [grins] Today's my birthday—I'm ten!

**KAYE GIBBONS:** I *know*. And guess what? We have a very special gift for you today. You want to know what it is?



**BONNIE™:** [nods] Uh-huh.

**BETH:** Bonnie™, what's the magic word?

**BONNIE™:** [clasps her hands together] Pretty please with a Sweet Sparkles™ cherry on top?

**ANDREW:** [laughs] Good girl, Bon-Bon!

**KAYE GIBBONS:** Well, since you asked so nicely . . . ["Happy Birthday" begins to play as three production interns enter the room, pushing three identical baby strollers. BETH gasps, her eyes filling with tears.]

**ANDREW:** [clutches the boys in his arms and stands] Oh my God. Oh my God!

**BONNIE™:** [runs to the strollers and peers inside, then looks up in confusion] But I wanted a bike.

**KAYE GIBBONS:** Well, Bonnie™, we thought we'd get you something even better. Remember when your mommy and daddy were so sad because the little babies from China couldn't come?

[BONNIE™ nods.]

**KAYE GIBBONS:** Well, we have not one, not two, but

three baby sisters from China, flown here special just for your birthday!

[BONNIE™ begins to cry, but the camera pans to the joyful faces of ANDREW and BETH.]

**ANDREW:** We've got our baker's dozen!

[CUT to opening credit sequence of *Baker's Dozen*. The theme song, "Recipe for Love," plays as three more pictures are added to the credits, superimposed over chocolate chip cookie designs.]

**VO: KAYE GIBBONS:** This has been another *Fireside Chat with Kaye Gibbons*. To keep up with the escapades of the Baker family, tune into MetaReel on Tuesday nights at eight or watch the twenty-four-hour live feed on MetaReel.com.

## SEASON 17, EPISODE 2

*(The One with Bourbon and Cigarettes)*



The dirt in the orchard is a little damp, but I sit on it anyway. Withered pieces of fruit lie scattered around me like forgotten toys, and the branches they've fallen from shiver in the brisk November wind. The scents of rotting apples, manure, and chimney smoke fill the air, and for a second, I can almost imagine I'm back in New Hampshire. Dad would be cooking dinner at home. Mom would be . . . still Mom. Probably doing a book tour and going on talk shows to sell her clothing line. And, let's be honest, I'd still be in the New Hampshire equivalent of this abandoned field—wearing more than the thin sweater I have on in California, but still running away from MetaReel, ditching the craziness at home.

I lean against the gnarled trunk of my favorite tree and take a deep breath. I think the idea of fresh air making things better is a myth. It doesn't take away pain—it sharpens it. I pull my knees up to my chest and press my eyes against my kneecaps until I see a fireworks display of color against my lids. Doesn't work. The image of

my mother with her camera-ready face and doe eyes won't disappear. I want to open my mouth up to the sky and scream as loud as I can, but this is no time to turn into the tabloid disaster that was "Bonkers Bonnie™."

My mind spins, a pinwheel that never stops turning round and round. Just like it did in the days before my parents pulled the plug on the show, just like it started to in the driveway, which was why my fight-or-flight response kicked into overdrive.

*Powder your nose and put on some lipstick before you head home. Don't cry! Puffy red eyes will only add to the misery that is your face. Remember, the camera adds ten pounds. Uglyuglyugly don't look at me, please, don't look at me.*

I open my eyes. No cameras. No crew. Just me and the trees and the wind. I remind myself that I'm *Chloe* now—history doesn't have to repeat itself. I even have the yearbook picture to prove it.

My phone starts vibrating, and I fish it out of my pocket—Tessa. My finger moves to the little answer icon, hovering over it. There's no way I can go over to her house, not like this, and I know if I hear her concerned voice, I'll start sobbing and blab everything. The phone pulses against my hand: *liar, liar*. I clutch it in my fist until the vibrations stop and the screen tells me I missed a call.

My leg's cramping, so I'm starting to stand up, when I hear the crunch of gravel as a car pulls into the turnoff from the highway. Heart in my throat, I slide back down the tree trunk. I'd parked my car behind an old fruit stand, but it's easy enough to spot from the road if you look longer than three seconds, which most people don't. Lacey Production Assistant must have put some sort of high-tech tracking device on my car while I was busy going schizo on camera. Soon they'll be following me around, and that will be it—I'll have to

start taking those pills again, the ones that make me feel like Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. Happy pills for unhappy girls. *Shitshitshit*. This has to be illegal. I need a lawyer. I need a—

The ignition turns off, and I hear the door creak open, then slam shut. Footsteps come my way, and my stomach does a flip. Bastards. MetaReel cameramen are notoriously relentless—I know that better than just about anybody. I have thirty, maybe sixty seconds before they're on me. I crouch and run deep into the orchard, barely feeling the cuts that low-hanging branches scratch into my face as I fly past them.

I hear footsteps behind me, and my chest does this thing that reminds me of all those panic attacks I used to get, like it's on a roller coaster that jumped off its track, so I veer off the path and slide down to the ground, smearing mud all over my new jeans. I clutch at my knees and gulp in air until my heart stops trying to wring itself out.

*Breathe. Breathe, dammit.*

My body's on red alert, and I have to bite my tongue hard or else I'll start giggling. It's a horrible nervous habit—very straitjackety.

“Chloe—what the hell? Where are you?”

Benton™.

The adrenaline slips out of me and melts into the earth. It's just my stupid big brother who I love more than anyone else in the world. No cameras. No strangers. My legs are lead pipes, and I have the shakes of an addict, but I stand and make my way back out to the path.

Benny's standing a few feet away, holding a pack of American Spirits in one hand and a bottle of Maker's Mark in the other.

“Dude, why didn't you call?” he says.

The subtext here is *thanks for letting me get ambushed by a camera crew, etc.*

I shrug. My eyes are getting all weepy again, so I can't see the expression on his face.

"Oh, hell. Come here."

I tumble into his arms, and Benny wraps them around me. I squeeze him tight, and I hear the air whoosh out of his chest as he kisses the top of my head. He smells like woody cologne with a faint whiff of cigarettes underneath, and that Bentonness that is sort of indescribable but always reminds me of coconut macaroons. He hugs me tight and proceeds to curse out our parents, Kirk, MetaReel, and a number of other people, but because he's Benton™, it sounds like a soft, reassuring lullaby more than a tirade.

"Did Mom tell you what I did?" I ask.

I feel him nod. "'Sokay. I'm sure they won't air it," he says.

Uh-huh. Riiiiiiight.

"Okay, I'm lying. I'm sure they'll air it in the most sensational way."

I wish I'd had the guts to say something into the camera. Now I'm just going to look like I was having another mental breakdown. Maybe I was. Maybe I am.

"I thought you were MetaReel," I mumble into his chest. "Did they follow you?"

Benny drops his arms and shoves the bourbon into my hands, then opens his pack of cigarettes.

"Dunno. Matt had to get back to school for football, so he dropped me off outside our gate, as usual. I took one look at the insanity and jumped into Mom's car. Then she calls as I'm driving away and proceeds to give me a lecture about driving while talking on my cell phone—for the benefit of the cameras, natch—and then is like, 'Oh,

by the way, the show's back on, and Bons just freaked.' I knew you had to be here, so I came right over."

The flame from the lighter catches in Benny's eyes, and it's like I'm looking at two little pools of hopelessness. This is going to be equally hard on both of us, just in different ways. He takes a drag of his cigarette while I take a swig of the Maker's Mark. The fire feels good as it courses down my throat, but I grimace anyway because, God, it's disgusting.

"Where'd you get this?" I ask.

"Had it in my backpack. I'd left it at Matt's house last time I was there, and I was gonna put it back in Kirk's stash, but . . . I think we have better uses for it."

"Do you think they'll have an episode with an intervention? You know, 'the Dangers of Teen Substance Abuse,' blah, blah, blah."

The look on his face reminds me of season eight, when he convinced my sisters and me to "decorate" Mom and Dad's bedspread with his permanent markers.

"As the eldest in the family," he says, "I can assure you I will take full responsibility for all illegal activities conducted on or off the set by our persons."

The set. Our house is not a home anymore, it's *the set*.

"Eldest," I say, brushing the air with quotation marks.

"Two months, baby. While you weren't even a twinkle in Mom's eye, Lex and I were already rocking out in another woman's womb."

That would be the surrogate mom my parents lassoed to help them have Benny and Lexie™ before my mom was able to get pregnant with me. They're twins, but Benny's older by sixteen minutes and eight seconds. We'll all be eighteen by the time we graduate in June, which, considering recent events, cannot come soon enough.

“Ho,” I say.

“Slut,” he counters.

I sock his arm, and he kicks my butt with the side of his foot, like he’s playing Hacky Sack, then he grabs the bottle out of my hand and gulps down a few shot glasses’ worth. He passes the bottle to me, and I take a tiny sip. We weren’t old enough to consider drinking last time around, but I did other things to dull the weirdness and pain. I run my hand over the bottle’s cream label, feeling kinda freaked out that I’m, what do you call it, self-medicating? I only know this phrase because it’s what the tabloids said about me four years ago. Benny seems to read my thoughts.

“This is just for today, ’kay?” he says.

My answer is another, larger, sip to drown the image that comes to mind of Tessa waiting for me at her house.

“Wasn’t that fun?” I ask.

“What?”

“Having friends.”

Benny twists the bracelet his boyfriend made for him last summer. “Yeah,” he says, so softly I barely catch it.

I can hear Dad just like it’s yesterday: *No more cameras. I promise, Bon-Bon. Just please don't hurt yourself again. I'll even come home, if that's what it takes.*

He didn’t, though. Come home. Instead, Mom got full custody, moved us to the other side of the country, and married the contractor working on our new house. Dysfunction meets function. Or something like that.

Benny kicks a clod of dirt, and it bursts against a tree trunk. I feel like that’s what just happened to my life in the past three hours.



“Dad’s gonna flip his shit when he finds out,” he says.

“Not like we would ever know,” I mutter. His condo in Florida might as well be on Mars.

Benny flicks the ash off his cigarette and takes a long drag. “Oh, I’m sure the media will tell us what he has to say about the whole thing.”

Yeah, that *would* be how we’d know his reaction. A celebrity gossip blog, a segment on *Entertainment Tonight*. Though I haven’t spoken a word to him in four years, it’s fairly easy to keep up with his B-list-celebrity self. Last I heard, he was doing some lame-ass charity golf thing in Hawaii.

I shiver and gaze at the tree branches overhead. I used to play this game where I’d look up at the sky and imagine that I was somewhere else in the world—Rome, maybe, or Thailand. And I would marvel at how the sky looks the same wherever you are on the planet, give or take some pollution. If I didn’t look down, I could be anywhere but here.

Benny shakes his head. “It’s gonna be so much worse than before.”

“That bitch,” I say, throwing a rotting apple down a path of trees. I rub my arm where Mom had grabbed me. “I can’t believe she’d do it without telling us first. Not after . . .” I trail off, not wanting to actually talk about *It*. “Why didn’t they tell us sooner?”

“Why did they make us be on this crazy fucking show in the first place?”

Suddenly, a lot of things start coming together: Mom’s insistence last month on my getting that expensive haircut and the hour-long consultation at the department store makeup counter. That recent

family portrait that she'd had us all take and Kirk's frequent business trips to Los Angeles. They'd been planning this for a while.

Benny takes another huge swig of bourbon. The bottle's only half full now.

"Okay, Dionysus, lay off the booze." I put the cap back on and start pulling him toward the car.

He stumbles over some roots in the path and nearly falls flat on his face, but he catches himself and looks up at me, his cigarette clamped between his two front teeth.

"Oh, my, what *would* the bloggers say if they saw me now?"

I give him my best look of disapproval. "You have to quit smoking, you do know that?"

"What, and take away an opportunity for Beth to show off her parenting skills?"

"But she's just a regular mom," I say, doing my best Beth Baker-Miller impersonation.

"Yes, and we can read all about it." He holds up his phone. "Pre-order for only \$24.99."

I look at the web page he's pulled up. "No." There's my mom's famous shaggy bob, her red hair vibrant against a plain white background. "*Recipe for a Happy, Healthy Family.*" I look up. "She wrote a cookbook?"

"*Au contraire.* This, my dear sister, is a tell-all. Convenient that it's coming out just a few weeks before the show starts up again, isn't it?"

He grabs his phone before it slips out of my hands.

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Lexie™ picks us up, a ride I know comes with about five thousand strings attached.

“This is the last time I play chauffeur to your two drunk asses,” she says by way of hello.

Benny struggles into the backseat, singing through the Beach Boys’ greatest hits. “*I wish they all could be California girrrrrls,*” he croons.

Lexie™ rolls her eyes.

If my sister were a character in a Victorian drama, she would be the snobbish rich girl with a penchant for talking shit about everyone behind her fan. For the record, this is the *only* time she has ever picked up our, quote, two drunk asses. But who’s counting?

“You know, Bonnie™, you don’t want to come off as a total drop-out,” Lex says. “What were you thinking, getting all up in the camera like that? Super psycho, if you ask me.”

She checks her side mirror as she pulls out, but it’s more because she misses her reflection than any attempt at driver safety.

“I didn’t ask you,” I say, changing the radio from pop to oldies. “But you’ve always been the expert on making love to the camera, so maybe I should have.”

“I was *twelve*. That’s a healthy age to explore your body,” Lex snaps. She puts the station back to Power 105.1—Today’s Hottest Music!

I arch one eyebrow, a skill I perfected during season ten. “Is that what we call masturbation these days?”

Benny howls with laughter. “Ohmygod, I totally forgot about that!” He adopts the tone of a voiceover actor: “*Will Lexie™ be able to resist humping the living room couch? Or will her raging hormones get the better of her? Find out next week on Baker’s—*”

“Shut up, Benny. At least I wasn’t a nudist. Or did you forget that your boy parts had to be blurred out for all of season seven?”

“I heart my body,” he says, making a heart with his fingers à la Taylor Swift.

Lexie™ ignores him, slowing down as we near our house.

“Keep driving.” I put my hand on the wheel, but she pushes me off.

“Don’t do that again, Bonnie™.” There’s a threat hiding in the silky folds of her voice, and I wish she would just freaking get over season thirteen.

“You know, I thought you’d be a little nicer to me now that the show’s back on,” I say. “Isn’t this, like, the happiest day of your life?”

I hope I’m not a mean drunk. Am I? In so many ways I am my father’s daughter. I switch the station back to oldies, just because.

Lex’s eyes shift to me for a second and then she just shakes her head. “Forgive me if I’m not super quick getting over being on house arrest since we were thirteen. It’s not like I was famous before or anything. And, you know, I totally love lying to my friends every day. And forget having a serious relationship. But whatever. No problem.”

Instantly I’m furious, like I’m breaking out in a sweat, but instead of sweat, it’s just pure, unadulterated rage oozing through my pores because, *God*, can she push my buttons, and I just want to freaking punch her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lexie™,” I say, my voice sticky sweet. “I had no idea I was keeping you from having a serious boyfriend. You mean all this time you didn’t *want* to sleep with half the guys at your school?”

I know I’ve gone too far. Something like hurt flits across her face, but it’s gone before I can feel too bad. It’s not like she’s ever held back to spare *my* feelings.

“Well, one of us has to get laid,” she spits.

Maybe I deserve that for essentially calling my sister a whore, but it’s still a low blow.

“Can you bitches *please* shut up?” Benny groans from the backseat.

“Well, now that the show’s back on,” I say, ignoring Benny, “you can stop blaming me for every problem in your life.”

“Great. I’ll just pretend the past four years haven’t happened. Thanks, Bonnie™, I feel a lot better now.”

I hate her because she’s right. And because all of it’s my fault—and *none* of it is. It was never just about protecting me. It was about what Dad did and the media storm and what people were saying about all of us and a million things I really don’t want to, really *can’t*, think about right now.

“Mom and Dad were the ones who canceled the show—” I start, but Lex’s voice cuts through me.

“Because someone had to go all drama queen and eat half the medicine cabinet.”

Then, “*Lexie*™.” It’s just her name, but Benny’s stacked a serious threat behind it.

For a second, it’s just this heavy silence with the Mamas and the Papas’ “California Dreamin’” playing on the oldies station which, you have to admit, is pretty ironic.

When I can’t take it anymore, I adopt an I’m-going-to-be-the-bigger-person tone and say, “Lex, we can’t go back until we give Benny a chance to sober up. Maybe we can grab some food or, I don’t know, but I told you that on the phone—”

“My car. My rules. I didn’t agree to anything,” she says. “Besides,

don't you think filming will be that much better with a little booze in you?"

Benny throws up his hands and starts laughing maniacally. Maybe I'm overreacting, but I think it's safe to say day one of filming is going to be a total disaster.