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**NATASHA
PRESTON**

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1

The tripod stands ready, camera mounted, primed to capture the next round of staged authenticity. Behind it, the ring light blazes – too bright, too harsh. Its glare drills into my skull, and every time I blink, glowing halos swarm my vision.

I dream about them sometimes, chasing me through some warped *Sonic the Hedgehog* horror world.

Vlogging has taken over my life. The only break I get is at school, and that's only because we're not allowed to record on campus.

Mom doesn't care how it affects me or my sister, Isla. As long as we get filming finished and give the viewers what they want. She's obsessed, honestly. They have to keep watching, liking, subscribing, commenting. Even if some of the commenters have nothing nice to say – and that's being kind. A lot of the comments are inappropriate. Some of them are downright creepy.

She doesn't care about that either. Rage bait can make more

money than a regular day-in-the-life, and Mom sure knows how to piss off strangers on the internet.

Vlogging our life was fun at the start, when it was days out and trips away. Now it's more like a prison.

I blink, the light beginning to burn my freaking corneas, and stifle a yawn. Yawning on camera would not make Mom happy.

This shouldn't take too long. We started later than she wanted, but she'll need to get the editing done tonight so she can upload first thing in the morning. Early is the goal, so that she can reply to comments as soon as she's back from her run.

Ever since she discovered you can make hundreds of thousands of dollars from filming every single thing you do – everything your *children* do too – it's *all* she's thought about. It started as a hobby, but it wasn't long before she was able to quit her job as a dental assistant.

Now she eats, sleeps, and breathes lifestyle vlogging. In the past year she's attended countless conferences for content creators. When she comes home, our 'daily routine' changes based on what she's just learned. Last time was the introduction of Mom making us packed lunches.

I hate every second of filming. I try to ignore the comments on each video, but I can't get away from them. My classmates watch and use the videos as ammunition to mock me in the hallways.

My whole life revolves around a camera. Today's vlog is a Q&A, just us answering questions that people have asked on the vlog or Instagram. It's something that's been requested a lot over the past few weeks.

We can't disappoint the fans.

Mom sits between me and Isla, a huge white toothy smile on her newly filled lips. I can't tell if she likes this or not.

Her smile has been getting scarily similar to Isla's. We both look like her, with the same pale, porcelain skin tone and big dark eyes, though Isla and Mom have black hair and mine is fair. But with all the work Mom has had done, she's starting to look more and more like Isla's twin. Not her mother.

The thought sends a shudder through my body.

At least they'll both be going away soon on a West Coast college tour to visit ten schools. Ten. Isla is only interested in three, but that wouldn't make the best viewing. The title of that vlog is already prepped, their stops meticulously planned around different activities they can do to show how fun Mom is.

All things she'd never have done with us before the cameras rolled.

'Okay, Sophie135 wants to know how you're feeling about leaving us for college, Isla.' Mom pouts like it's a tragedy, like her eldest daughter going away is a knife to the heart.

I think I'm dreading it most. When she's gone, I'm the last one left – just me and Mom, stuck filming. LouPlusTwo. Her name front and centre, her ego the main character. Isla and I are just props, proof of her greatness.

We don't even like the salmon and cream cheese bagels she films herself making for breakfast. I pick the fish off before I eat it.

'I am super excited! I mean, leaving my mom and sister is going

to be the hardest thing I have ever done, but they both inspire me daily. I'm determined to make them proud.'

I almost throw up in my mouth a little. Keeping my eyes from rolling is a full-time job.

'I'll miss you so much ... but I'm totally moving into your room,' I say, adding the humour that always gets a great reaction. *Connie's the funny one*. Still, I will miss her.

I stick to the script to a point, but I don't want the people who know me in real life to say I'm a different person online.

Unlike my mother.

Mom and Isla laugh and turn back to the camera. Mom pushes her hair behind her ears. 'Sisters, huh! Okay, the next one is for you, Connie. FluffyBunnyMom – cute name, by the way – wants to know if negative comments ever bother you.'

Mom looks me dead in the eye, the smile growing but so false it's laughable. It's a warning, one that tells me to read from the script. We've been prepped on this particular question dozens of times. She drills the response into our heads daily, as if saying it constantly is enough to stop hate from penetrating our soul.

Shrugging takes effort. Lying wears me down, and lately, it's all I do.

'No. I scroll straight past anything like that. I don't have time for negativity.'

'Great answer, honey,' Mom says, all warmth and practised concern. 'I do try to delete anything that is too personally critical before they see it. They're human, remember, just teenagers. But

unfortunately, a few slip through. I will say I'm incredibly proud of how well they handle it.'

She lies so effortlessly, I doubt even a trained agent in the CIA could catch her.

We've all seen the messages. Particularly the ones from homeboy666, blueqb, and Roz, with homeboy666 the most passionately critical. They started out harmless, comments like 'your daughters don't want this' and 'this doesn't happen when the camera stops rolling'. Things I actually agree with. Only now, five months on, they're saying things like 'your children need to be removed' and 'someone in that house is going to snap'. Yesterday, it was 'we all know where you live'.

Mom films everywhere – our street, our yard, all over town. The town name, road signs – everything is in her videos.

Jules, Mom's best friend and, oh yeah, the sheriff, warned her to keep filming inside or at least stay out of our immediate area. She doesn't listen. Too late anyway – the damage is done.

'Mom has always been fantastic at protecting us from hateful comments on our vlogs,' Isla says, backing up Mom's lie.

I nearly snap my neck whipping around to look at her but catch myself just in time, smiling as if I agree. Does Isla ever laugh inside her head too?

'Aww,' Mom coos. 'I have to protect my babies.'

I can already hear the haters ripping that one apart.

As soon as a vlog is live, I look. I can't help myself. The majority of comments are nice, and it makes me wonder if I'm in the wrong.

But the haters, those are the people I find myself agreeing with more and more. We shouldn't share our whole life. We should have privacy. We should be able to choose whether we want to film.

At least she's not dragging us along to the vloggers convention at the end of the college tour. I'll get fourteen glorious days without Mom, twelve without Isla. When my sister returns home, I'll have two days to get inside her head and find out if she's genuinely happy with all this or just playing along for all the perks.

Mom reels off more questions, obviously skipping the ones that ask if she's happy with herself for exploiting her children.

The answer is yes.

'Okay, this question is for me.' She lowers the phone with the vetted questions. 'LauraBanks says, "Louise, how do you keep yourself motivated every day?"'

Money.

'Great question, Laura. It's definitely a choice I make every morning. I decide that I'm going to get up early and upload, that I'm going to run and make my girls breakfast. One day I'll look back on this time and I'll want to know that I did my best for my family every day.'

Oh jeez.

I smile but it takes great effort.

'All right, we only have time for one more question, guys. Isla and I *still* need to pack for our road trip – keep an eye on our socials for pics and shorts along the way! Right, what's the best thing about vlogging as a family? That was asked by quite a few people. I'll go first. My absolute favourite part is spending time with my girls. It's definitely brought us closer together.'

She's basically just admitted that we didn't spend as much time together before she started this. It was a simpler time, one I would move back into our small three-bedroom house for in a heartbeat.

'Yeah, I mean, we've always been close, but we get to go on more trips and do more things together now,' Isla adds, seamlessly fixing Mom's mistake.

I fight the urge to undo her work.

Lately, she's been doing it so easily – without hesitation. And I'm *terrified* it's becoming second nature.

'I agree,' I say. 'I love the extra trips. Especially the mini vacations.'

That's not a lie. We do more now; the cost is that I can't do any of it in private. Even when we're not filming, the vlog is doing so well that we get recognized most places we go.

Mom nods and squeezes my hand, slightly harder than necessary, her silent way of telling me to keep it up. We're live – the stakes are higher. 'Those are my favourite too. And I'm looking forward to planning more with you, Connie. We'll get to surprise Isla during her college breaks.'

I'm sure Isla will love spending spring break with her mom and her sister rather than partying on a beach with her new friends.

I only smile in lieu of a verbal reply because there's nothing I can think to say – that she would approve of, anyway. Every time we film, the anger that's bubbling under the surface increases. I've told her time and time again that it's not safe, that she's oversharing.

Does she believe me? No.

Does she care? Also no.

Do I wish I could *make* her listen? Yes.

One day I *will* make her listen.

'Well, that's all we have time for today. The girls and I have plans, so we'll see you soon. Bye, Lou Fam!'

I smile wider and wave at the camera, my jaw aching from the effort. My friends will know how fake that was, and I can already feel my cheeks heating at the mere thought of them watching. Mom gets up after a couple of seconds and switches the camera off.

She turns to us, arms stretched wide, smile just as big. 'That went well. Though I think you could be a little more vocal next time, Connie.'

'Sure,' I say, picking at a hangnail, already discarding her feedback. It's never as constructive as she claims.

'Okay, girls, get to school before you're late. One more call from that arrogant woman in the office and I'll scream.'

Right, because how dare she worry about two exhausted students constantly arriving late? It's barely morning, third time this week – and already my head pounds. Now we'll have to rush.

'Come on, Connie, I'll drive,' Isla says, springing up and grabbing her bag from its hook on the wall.

I do the same, having already packed, knowing we'd run over. Slamming the front door harder than necessary wasn't my plan, but I'm so filled with irritation that it's the only way to get a fraction of it out. Some days I wonder how I haven't exploded.

'How are you really feeling about the road trip?' I ask as I get in the car, forcing my hands to relax as they constantly try to make

fists. My shoulders have been aching way more than they should for a sixteen-year-old. I'm tense all the time.

Isla peels out of the driveway and speeds toward school. The bell is in seven minutes, and it takes five to get there. We'll have to run as soon as she's parked.

'Connie, don't start something.' Her words sound like one long sigh, because somehow I'm the one she finds most frustrating. Not that she can take it out on Mom, I suppose.

'I'm not trying to start anything. It's a genuine question. Are you going to let her tell people where you go? Jules said not to.'

She sighs long and hard again, as if she's too irritated to speak. 'Stop worrying so much. Colleges are huge, and plenty of people know where you go.'

'Yeah, but those people are friends and family. Not strangers,' I point out, staring at her profile. 'Are you not at all concerned about those people who consistently post harsh, judgey comments on the vlog?'

'A couple of negative people in our space isn't bad.'

'Oh my god, Isla. Look at the comments! They're ripping us apart. I wish Mom would block them.'

'You could just ignore them, you know.'

Wow. As if I haven't heard that one a thousand times. I want to scream at her that it's not that easy. And honestly? I don't believe she ignores them either. She just pretends.

'Sure,' I mutter, letting it go, because Isla isn't going to take my side, not while she's benefiting from the vlogging. I wish I knew

how she does it – how she stays away from the comments section. I never can. The itch to check yesterday’s video is already clawing at me.

Two days is the longest I’ve gone without looking.

Isla’s focused on the road, so I take out my phone, click on the latest YouTube video, and head straight to the comments. It’s just a regular day-in-the-life video, starting with Mom waving us off to school – didn’t do that this morning since the camera had stopped rolling – and then everything she did after. I haven’t watched it, but she said she ran to the store to pick up road trip treats and some things to leave for me.

My eyes are trained to look out for *blue*, *home*, and *roz*. I spot blueqb straightaway. A snarky comment gathering attention with eighteen likes and six replies.

Buying junk food for ur 16 yo daughter doesn't make up for leaving her home alone!!!

They aren’t wrong. Though fourteen whole days without Mom and with junk food is a dream come true.

The replies are mixed, some agreeing, some telling them to lighten up, and one asking how they know I’ll be alone.

Mom hasn’t said I will be, and she’s made sure to mention that I’ll be looked after. Which means she’s asked the neighbours to check in and is letting me have as many sleepovers as I want so that I ‘feel safe’. If she knows I’d prefer another person in the house to feel safe, then why is she leaving me alone?

Jules said she’ll be driving by the house on her way to and from work, going a couple of blocks out of her way to ensure I’m okay.

Blue has replied to the person telling them not to assume I’ll be alone.

Would u leave ur kid home alone for a week?

How do you know she’s home alone?

My stomach twists. How *do* they know I’ll be alone? I should be excited – two whole weeks, just me – but nerves creep in. I’ve never been on my own for that long.

Lou never mentioned anyone staying with her and she overshares everything!

Well, that’s how they know. Mom doesn’t get it – doesn’t get that some viewers see through her facade. She’s a good liar, but not perfect.

The knot in my stomach loosens as logic takes over. They don’t know, they’re just reading between the lines. Accurately, sure, but they can’t be certain.

Roz has also replied. Just once.

Lou doesn't care about connie that's obvious.

Okay, ouch. It’s not exactly that bad. Mom cares more about herself than anyone else but it’s not like she doesn’t give a crap

about me. Her version of being a great mom is just a bit different from what I think and need.

‘Connie, come on, what’re you doing?’ Isla questions, turning on her wipers as a light rain mists the windshield. ‘I can practically see the gears of your sharp mind turning. Talk to me.’

We always talk. Before the vlog it was me and Isla against the world. I wouldn’t say I’ve lost her, but she is slowly being seduced by the money and lifestyle we have now.

‘Oh. Just messaging Rosa,’ I say, feeling crappy for lying to my sister.

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

Isla raises a perfect brow but stays silent. Her expression says it all – she doesn’t buy it, but she won’t argue. We have an unspoken rule now: don’t fight about the vlog. It’s the only way to keep our relationship intact.

I curl my fingers into my palm, resisting the urge to reply to the comments flooding the screen. I’ll occasionally leave a quick thanks or an emoji on the nice ones, but even that invites more – people expecting engagement, demanding more of me.

Or worse, using it as an opening to tear me apart.

Too much makeup, not enough. Too quiet, too intense. I should chill out, I should open up, I should stay private.

There’s no winning. They think they know me.

We pull into the school parking lot and Isla stops next to her secret girlfriend’s car. Mom doesn’t want to add a girlfriend or boyfriend dynamic to the vlogs, so we’re not supposed to date.

So she has no idea that Isla and Ally have been together for six months, or that me and Seth are going on eighteen months.

Our family is filled with secrets. Most of them we only have to keep from everyone outside our house.

A few we keep from each other.