

Deleted Scene: *Christmas and New Year's Eve*

Christmas morning meant sleeping in until ten or so, then wandering downstairs to fix breakfast and open present. Bethany's parents had stopped the Santa bit when Bethany was eight and said she didn't believe in Santa. Now she and Darlene received a couple big expensive things and a pile of expensive clothes. This year Bethany's big presents were a TV/VCR and a digital camera. She hadn't really wanted either. "Thanks," she said, and watched Darlene open a box containing a leather jacket, sitting on the futon she'd also been given.

Compared to the extravagance of their parents' gifts, Bethany and Darlene's presents seemed small and insignificant. Bethany faked her smile, then went upstairs to get dressed.

At Uncle Jake and Aunt Gloria's house, the three kids were playing with their new toys amid the crumpled wrapping paper that littered the living room floor. The Calebs eased their way around the kitchen table crowded with chairs to throw their coats on the couch in the

den. The house smelled like apple pie and felt warm and homey, but Bethany felt awkward. She kept remembering her mother saying, "We're not exactly in the same league as your Aunt Gloria. We can afford better."

While the adults chatted in the kitchen, waiting for the grandparents to arrive, Darlene turned on the TV and attempted to find something good. She settled for a Lifetime Christmas movie. Bethany sat stiffly in an armchair, watching her cousins play. Even when she was little her Christmases had felt cold and formal until they all came over to Aunt Gloria's. Then the day became warm and formal. They only visited Aunt Gloria's on holidays, and the oldest of Aunt Gloria's kids, Jamie, was nine. Neither Bethany or Darlene particularly enjoyed children. So while the kids played and the adults talked, Bethany and Darlene watched TV. It was the same as every year.

Eventually the grandparents arrived, and there was another round of opening presents. Bethany received two envelopes, one containing

a fifty-dollar bill, from Uncle Jake and Aunt Gloria, the other containing a hundred-dollar bill, from her grandparents. She watched the kids opening huge boxes with Lego play sets and Barbie dream houses and whatever else had been on their Christmas wish lists. The pile of presents for those kids seemed to be never-ending. Bethany wondered when her grandparents had stopped caring about what she really wanted and went with the money approach. There was no thought involved in giving someone money.

Bethany spent the rest of the day wishing it was over already, especially when Uncle Jake tried to give her a glass of wine and Mrs. Caleb said neither of her daughters would be drinking today. Last year Bethany had gotten drunk and no one had noticed or cared.

Bethany would have been content to sleep her entire Christmas break away, but Darlene had other ideas. First she came home one day with a box of hair dye and convinced Bethany to dye her hair back to her original color. It seemed like every other day Darlene wanted

Bethany to accompany her to the mall, and since Bethany had nothing better to do, she went, even though she didn't have any money and shopping seemed like an empty activity. Then, since Bethany had no plans for New Year's Eve, Darlene invited her along to a party.

With the car windows rolled down so Darlene could smoke, Bethany huddled in her coat, with three of the vents spraying hot air toward her. Darlene's rapid flicking of the cigarette ash out the window and her raw bare hands annoyed Bethany, for no apparent reason. She figured she had PMS or something.

The walkway up to Cara Sullivan's house was dark. No one had thought to turn on the outside light. Cara's brother Jase let them into the house. Jase didn't seem to recognize Bethany, and he was one of the reasons she had been convinced to come—he knew James, had been friends with him for years before Bethany knew either of them.

"You want a beer?" Jase offered, pointing to the kitchen.

"Sure," Darlene said, helping herself.

“Do you have any soda?” Bethany asked quietly, hoping Darlene wouldn’t notice. No luck.

“What, are you going to pull a goody-goody act? Mom and Dad aren’t here. You won’t have any fun sober.”

Glad to see you have such great friends, Bethany thought. Jase said, “I think there’s some Coke in there. Help yourself.”

Bethany stepped over to the fridge and got out a can and popped it open. “At least put some rum in it or something,” Darlene said. Bethany shrugged.

The living room contained a scrawny fake Christmas tree, whose lights provided for the whole room, and a wide screen TV, whose light dominated the whole room. MTV was playing, festive shots of Time Square. She leaned against a table near the tree and watched the lights twinkle.

A lot of Darlene’s friends from high school were there. There was Matt Jones, who Darlene had dated all through high school, and Lucy Graystone and Stephanie Parker, who she’d

been friends with since second grade. There were fifteen or so people in the room. Bethany recognized a couple of Jase's friends, but didn't know anyone else but him. People walked back and forth between her and the Christmas tree. Lucy said hi but didn't stop to talk, she was being led by her longtime boyfriend. So Bethany leaned against the table and wondered what was wrong with her. She had no desire to talk to any of these people and none of these people wanted to talk to her, it seemed. Was she that boring? Did she still give off freak vibes?

At one point Darlene went back to the kitchen to refill and talked to her. "Why don't you sit down with everyone?" she asked.

"I don't know any of these people."

"Yes, you do. You've met all my friends before," Darlene said. Bethany shrugged. "Well, why did you even come then." She walked away as she said it.

When it got closer to midnight and the ball dropped, everyone started making out. Even Darlene started kissing Matt. Bethany looked around to realize she was the only one without a

date. She drifted into the kitchen to get another Coke.

“Hey, Bethany,” said Jase, who was mixing a drink on the counter. “When did you get here?”

“I came with Darlene,” she said.

“You dyed your hair.”

“Yeah. This is my natural color.”

“Really? I’d never guess you for a blond.”

Bethany supposed that was a complement, that she wasn’t ditsy or slutty. “What are you making?”

“Screwdriver. Want one?”

“Sure.”

Jase poured some vodka in a glass then got out the orange juice. “You haven’t been around much lately, huh?”

“No,” Bethany said, accepting the drink.

“Busy?”

“More like I’ve been avoiding people.”

“Like James and Genn?”

Bethany took a swallow of the drink. “Yeah.” It was strong. She felt like gagging on the vodka.

“I think they’ve been avoiding us, too.”
Bethany looked at Jase. “Genn got arrested at school for having drugs on her.”

Bethany remembered that half-day of school, the vice-principal holding onto her. “How could they know?”

Jase laughed, like a sneer. “She dropped a fucking needle on the floor when the vice-principal stopped her for not having a hall pass. How dumb can you get?”

“Was it heroin or something?” Now she knew what that money was for.

“Yeah. She got arrested and now she’s at some hospital going through detox. James managed to stay out of it but I haven’t really heard from him.”

“That’s crazy.”

“You’re telling me. I thought heroin was out in the eighties.”

Darlene suddenly came into the kitchen. “Bethany, let’s go.”

“Um... okay.” Bethany got her coat. “Bye, Jase.”

Jase grunted. Darlene practically dragged Bethany out the door. It was twenty past midnight, a new year.

“That Matt Jones. Now I remember why I dumped him!”

They got into Darlene’s car. Darlene started it up and put it in reverse despite the layer of frost on the rear window. “I thought he dumped you,” Bethany said.

“Oh, shut up, you were only thirteen when I happened,” Darlene said.

“Whatever,” Bethany said, suddenly angry. “Then why were you locked in your room crying for like two weeks after?”

“You don’t know anything about it!”

“Why did you kiss him if you dumped him?”

“Like you’d be any different with James!”

“That’s not fair,” Bethany muttered.

“Life’s not fair. So don’t go being a hypocrite.” Darlene was driving too fast, punching through radio stations with one hand on the wheel.

Bethany finished the argument with, “Watch the road, wouldja?” Darlene swerved back to her side of the yellow lines. Luckily they lived only five minutes from the Sullivans. The sweep of Darlene’s headlights revealed that Mr. and Mrs. Caleb were not back from their evening out. Bethany knew they probably wouldn’t come home until four or five in the morning.

She went directly to bed, without brushing her teeth or changing out of her clothes, and wondered about James.