

Deleted Scene: *Christmas Shopping*

Darlene came home for winter break a few days before the high school release for Christmas vacation. With Darlene came a cloud of trouble. Mr. and Mrs. Caleb had received a phone call from the college saying Darlene had been caught drinking for a second time and had to pay a fine.

“So what? It’s only, like, fifty bucks. It’s not a big deal.” Bethany didn’t know when Darlene had gotten so flaky, although she supposed she was in the same league as her sister with her own underage drinking escapade. Bethany hadn’t gone near her parents’ liquor again, but now she overdosed on Nyquil to help her go to sleep. Now the Nyquil was starting not to work, leaving Bethany at three or four in the morning to toss and turn, dreading the morning.

Late on a Saturday afternoon, Darlene knocked on Bethany’s door. Bethany rolled over in bed and yelled, “What?” over her stereo.

“Do you want to go Christmas shopping?”

Bethany sat up slowly. She hadn’t done any Christmas shopping at all, and it was less than a week away. “Okay. Where?”

“At the mall. When will you be ready?”

“Uh... five minutes?”

Bethany crawled out of her blankets and traded her fleece pants for jeans. She ran her fingers through her hair, noticing the two-inch blond roots in her mostly black hair. It gave her a skunk-like appearance. She pulled a knit hat over it and bundled up for the snowy day. Even though she wore bulky sweaters and long underwear and thick socks, she always felt cold. When she got into Darlene’s car, she immediately cranked up the heat and shivered through the initial blast of cold air.

“So, who do you still have to shop for?” Darlene asked. The CD played clicked on to Sarah McLachlan.

“Everyone,” Bethany said, slumping back in her seat, nestling into the folds of her scarf.

Outside the car windows the world looked gray. The last snowfall had long since turned dingy by traffic. The naked trees shook their frozen branches in the slight wind. The houses with tacky Christmas lights annoyed her, as if the family inside was trying to force everyone to be as holiday-cheery as they were. There were more than enough houses decorated straight out of Martha Stewart magazine, as if the family inside wanted to also force perfection on the world. She knew there was some controlling mother inside whose children were unhappy, struggling to break out of the happy, perfect mold the mother was pouring them into. Bethany closed her eyes.

For the entire forty-five minute ride to the mall, Darlene chattered to Bethany about how great college was, how she'd never had many friends in high school but now in college people were so much more accepting. Bethany remembered how everyone at Darlene's college had stared at her black clothes, but she nodded and said, "Yeah?" and Darlene rambled on and left Bethany alone.

In the mall Darlene immediately dragged her into Abercrombie & Fitch. The salespeople who greeted them looked like the models in the oversized posters on the walls. Even though Bethany now wore normal clothes that her mother probably bought in these stores, she felt like the salespeople could see right through her, see that she wasn't like them. Everyone looked too similar, even the customers for the most part looked like the models. Techno music gave the store an even more depersonalized feeling. Bethany overheard a girl say to her friend as they looked through a rack of shirts, "What's the point of buying a shirt here if it doesn't say Abercrombie & Fitch on it?"

Bethany followed Darlene around cluelessly until Darlene grabbed a pair of perfectly worn jeans off a rack. "You're a size 8, right? Here," Darlene said, then pulled Bethany into the dressing room. Darlene had seven items of clothing on her arm.

Inside the stall Bethany breathed a small sigh of relief to be alone. There was a piece of paper taped to the door with the words "ABANDON ALL HOPE" in capital letters at the top. At first she thought it might be an anti-shoplifting

notice, but the rest of the message read: "Your life is meaningless anyway, why not end it? All your dreams and hopes will never come true and like everything else you will be nothing, forgotten by the selfish people you call friends." The bottom of the notice said, "A public service announcement by Cyrus."

Bethany wondered who Cyrus was and why he would put a message like that in a dressing room stall. How many girls had read the message and been moved to depression? She didn't think too many people had noticed it. They would just like it was weird or mean. But life really was meaningless, only no one wanted to admit it to themselves. Bethany took down the paper, folded it up, and put it in her pocket.

Finally Darlene was ready to leave the store, carrying a bag printed with photos of perfect people. Then Darlene dragged her into the GAP.

Half-heartedly Bethany picked out gifts for the family she would see at Christmas. On the drive home Darlene talked about how close she thought the two of them were.