

Deleted Scenes: *Cleaning*

The day before Christmas Eve was a Friday, and everyone had parties to go to. Bethany didn't, so she was watching TV. Darlene spent an hour in the bathroom doing her hair and makeup, then threw on a pair of dirty jeans and a sweater before running out the door. Bethany was pretty sure the party was being hosted by Darlene's ex-boyfriend, Matt.

The Marlowes, whose daughter Kelly was a senior at Middlesex High, were hosting a catered party at their mansion. There was going to be a lot of rich, important people there. Mr. and Mrs. Caleb spent close to two hours getting ready, and never stopped mentioning how surprised they were to be invited. Bethany rolled her eyes at their conversation upstairs and turned the volume up on the TV. There was nothing good on. She was watching an E! Entertainment Channel biography of some B-list movie actress she'd never heard of.

"Here's some money to order in dinner," Mrs. Caleb said, handing Bethany a twenty. On second thought she added another ten. "Maybe invite some friends over or something, honey." She patted Bethany's head.

"Sure, Mom," Bethany said.

"Now, I'm not sure what time we'll be home, but Darlene should get back about midnight. That's her curfew, anyway, but as she told me last night, she's an adult and she can come and go as she pleases, so we'll see..."

Bethany wished her parents would leave already. They fussed with each other's coats, making sure they looked perfect. Finally they headed out the door.

"Don't even think about going into the liquor cabinet!" Mr. Caleb said before closing the door.

Bethany sighed and stared at the Christmas tree beside her. It was fake, and sparsely decorated with hand-painted wood ornaments and glass balls. There was a string of silver tinsel, and string of gold beads, and a string of white lights that twinkled in a random pattern. A gaudy gold star topped the

tree, and underneath, a toy train circled the bottom. Mrs. Caleb had spent all of one Saturday decorating the house for Christmas, with the better part of the day spent on the tree and the living room. Identical red and white stockings hung from the fireplace mantel at exact intervals. The everyday decorations were gone, all the photos that were usually on the mantel had been replaced by green and red candles and glass statues of angels. Even the magazines on the coffee table were gone and a large centerpiece of candles and holly sat collecting dust. Bethany wondered why her mother had so many candles, since she rarely lit them.

The whole room irritated her with its Country Home perfection. Bethany remembered a time when she was little and she had brought home Christmas tree ornaments she'd made in school. Years of ornaments made in school now hid in boxes in the attic. Mrs. Caleb never put them on her Christmas trees. It would ruin the perfect image she worked so hard to create.

Bethany shut off the TV and went up to her room. Her blank walls still surprised her. So she took out a blank canvas and her paints. She wasn't sure what kind of art to create. Should she try to make something she wanted every to see, or should she paint to decorate her room? She looked around at the stark white walls that had once bothered her so much, and her black velvet curtains and bedspread. She remembered how dark her room had looked with all the paintings there. Now the room looked cleaner, simpler, open. She put her art things away and went downstairs for a garbage bag.

It had been ages since she cleaned out her closet. Two garbage bags were instantly filled with old clothes and shoes that hadn't fit her for years. After clearing out her closet and drawers, she started on her CD collection. It didn't take long to weed out a shoebox full of CDs, old crap like Mariah Carey and Backstreet Boys she shuddered to think she once listened to. She moved on to her book collection and filled three paper bags with the books she'd been collecting since second grade, Baby-Sitters Club and R.L. Stine. Her bookshelves were now empty except for a few Stephen King books and her

copies of *The Bell Jar* and *Catcher in the Rye*. Most of her stuffed animals, hidden in her closet, went into garbage bags.

She dusted and vacuumed and put everything else away. By ten o'clock she was done. All the walls were bare. Most of the shelves were bare except for one with books and one with photos of Bethany with Jana and Bethany with James. The room looked ready. She lay down on her bed and waited to be filled up with something.