

Deleted/Revised Scene: *Thanksgiving, Jana's email, & burning the paintings*

The weekend passed slowly. Thanksgiving was going to be that week, and Mrs. Caleb was supposed to host this year. The phone was tied up most of the day, her calling various caterers. "No one else caters Thanksgiving," Bethany said Saturday night at dinner. "Aunt Gloria cooked everything herself last year."

Mrs. Caleb gave her daughter a look. "Aunt Gloria and I aren't exactly in the same league, dear," she said. "We can afford better."

Bethany knew her mother was having the Thanksgiving catered because she couldn't cook to save her life. Bethany remembered her mother trying to microwave popcorn once and the fire alarms went off. That was when Bethany was eight and she hadn't seen her mother microwave anything since.

So Bethany stayed in her bedroom for most of the weekend, either sleeping or trying to sleep or going on the Internet. When she was sleeping she felt like she should be doing something, but all she could think of doing was go online and check her email. There was an email from Travis from a week ago (she hadn't checked it in a while). It said something about how he had a great time last weekend and Bethany was different from any other girl he knew. She deleted it and wrote to Darlene warning her to not give Travis her phone number or call her for him again. There was an email from Jana from several months ago that she'd never bothered to answer. She read it again:

"hi bethany. how's life at middleton high? things are ok in delaware. i'm going to be in my schools production of grease. i'm going to be one of the pink ladies and i get to sing. i'm taking voice lessons so maybe i can get the lead in our next play.

i hate to say it but i'm so glad i didn't have to go to high school there. i have a lot more friends here and no one makes fun of me being fat.

talk to you later and i miss you, jana."

Bethany signed off and walked over to her bed, fell down on it. She had absolutely no energy. There wasn't anything for her to do with her energy anyway. She wished she could rewind time to August, when she and James

were still going out. She and Genn had their fight before then, but that was okay. As long as Genn was totally out of the way, it was okay.

She fell asleep for a little bit and when she woke up it was still only four o'clock. She could hear her parents in their room getting ready for a night out. She turned her radio on to drown out their boring arguments over what to wear, etc., but a commercial was on her usual station. With her remote she flipped through the channels. The new N'Sync song was playing on about five different stations. Eventually she landed on the country station and paused at the song playing. The song had sounded so sad that Bethany identified with it immediately. The singer, a woman, sang about going back to an ex-boyfriend for the night, just because she felt so sad and lonely without him. But at the end of the song, she still didn't have anyone new to distract her, she only had the old memories renewed. When the song ended and the announcer's twangy voice cut into the bitter taste left by the song, Bethany realized she was crying. The music had reminded her too much of her relationship with James.

She stayed in bed listening to country music until her parents finally left after five-thirty. Every song seemed relevant to her life. They made her want to go drown her depression in beer at the bar. Instead, she went downstairs after the garage door had closed and she was sure her parents were gone for good, and inspected the selection of alcohol in the fridge. She thought about drinking the remainder of a bottle of Scotch, but then saw the bottle of Peach Schnapps in back. It was nearly full. She took the whole bottle up to her room.

The peach Schnapps tasted good. Before she knew it she had drank half the bottle. When realized it she put the cap back on and set the bottle aside. For the past hour, while drinking, she just sat and listened to country music, which all seemed sad for some reason, and thought about her life. She had no friends to speak of and she was alone and drunk on a Friday night. She didn't know how to make her life better. She didn't even know who she was, if she was the person everyone had known since kindergarten, up until eighth grade, or if she was the new Bethany, the radically different person she'd appeared to

be in high school. Who was she now, out of her black freak clothes? Was she still an artist if she didn't dress like one or hang out with other art-type people?

For a while she stared at the paintings hung around her room. How could she be an artist? She wasn't even as good as other people in her art class, never mind if she decided to go to art school or tried to hack the gallery circuit in New York. Maybe Mr. Beck was fooled by how she dressed too. All her stupid black scary paintings—who actually believed she felt all that hate inside? Her first five paintings, from that first art class with James, she remembered almost copying another student's style James had admired. Another painting she'd done of a face reflected in a suicide knife—she had never been suicidal. Compared to how she felt now, what she thought had been depression had been nothing. Jesus Christ, even taking that gun to school had just been an effort to feel suicidal. Instead she'd felt homicidal. Mrs. Fenster, her middle school art teacher, had once commented on her report card, "Effort needs improvement." She hadn't seen any budding artist in Bethany.

Bethany stared and stared at her paintings. Then she took a utility knife out of her art box, and slashed every one that was fake. When she finished, the only ones left were the forest of suicide paintings. She reasoned they weren't fake because they were illustrations. But they were borderline fake. And the sculpture was definitely designed for shock effect, not because it was anything true.

She crammed as much as she could in her wastebasket and brought the mutilated canvases outside. She had to make several trips, but finally she had the whole pile in the middle of the backyard. She found a can of gasoline in the garage and some matches. Then she lit the whole pile on fire.

The blaze seemed almost to fit into the landscaping. The backyard had a tiled walkway and stone benches and a birdbath and wildflowers had been carefully planted to appear wild. The blaze lit up the wilted, frozen flowers.

The heat made her back up only a little. Fire had always had a way of hypnotizing her, and now was no exception: she watched well-memorized

paintings curl and blacken into an unrecognizable pulp. The stretcher boards kept the fire going. Occasionally she tossed a glug of gasoline into the fire to see it blaze up.

“Hey! Hey!”

Bethany slowly turned to see who was calling. It was her neighbor, Mr. Wilkins.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?” Mr. Wilkins yelled, coming into the backyard from the driveway.

“I’m just burning some stuff,” Bethany said. She suddenly realized how numb her mouth was. She hoped Mr. Wilkins couldn’t tell how drunk she was.

“You can’t do that! You have to have a permit to burn things like that,” he said, now close enough for Bethany to see that his face looked more scared than angry. “Where are your parents? Did they let you do this?”

“They’re out for the evening,” she said.

Mr. Wilkins looked around behind him, then stalked over and pulled out the garden hose. “Someone might think your house was on fire with this much smoke going up,” he yelled over the water gushing out of the hose.

Silently Bethany watched the water spray down the fire. The once alive canvases wilted and dripped. The bright pile became black and dead. Now Bethany could see that a large patch of brown grass was scorched.

“You’re lucky I saw you. Someone could have called the police. I think you’d better clear this up before your parents see. I know your mother won’t be too happy about this mess.” As Mr. Wilkins left, Bethany noticed that he was barefoot, wearing silk pajamas and a flannel robe. She turned back to the mess and giggled.

Eleven o’clock AM. A knock on Bethany’s bedroom door. She sat up, confused. She was still in her pajamas that she never changed out of yesterday. She opened the door.

Mrs. Caleb looked angry. “What the hell did you do to the backyard?” she demanded.

“I just burned some stuff,” Bethany said, rubbing her eyes.

Then Mrs. Caleb saw the half-empty bottle of Schnapps on Bethany’s nightstand. “Bethany Caleb!”

Bethany followed her gaze. She knew she was in deep shit now. “Oh, that. I also took two hundred dollars from your safe because James needed it.” She felt shaky, but the words came out as casually as she’d hoped.

Mrs. Caleb’s jaw dropped. “You—You are grounded!” she screamed, her face red against her perfect blond hair and pearl necklace. She slammed the door and Bethany collapsed on her bed. How had she managed that? Even when she shocked her parents with her outfits, even when she got C’s on her report card, even when she broke her curfew, she really hadn’t gotten in trouble. They couldn’t punish her for her fashion sense, and C’s were still passing grades, and her curfew hadn’t really been enforced. But now, these three things, stealing, drinking, setting a fire, those were all crimes. She’d never even been grounded before. So now she had no friends and her parents were pissed at her.

She went back to bed.

Her father got around to yelling at her at dinner, so Bethany didn’t eat too much. She stayed in her room the rest of the weekend even though it began to feel more and more claustrophobic. She opened the windows on Sunday night and piled blankets on her bed. At 3:26AM she woke up freezing and starving, so she closed her windows, cranked the thermostat in the hallway up to 90 and went into the kitchen to find something to eat.

Without any lights, the kitchen had a strange green tint from the digital clock on the microwave. Bethany opened the refrigerator and saw messy stacks of days-old take-out. The cabinets revealed cans of carrot soup and mixed vegetables. Unlike normal houses, there were no bowls of fruit or even a cookie jar on the counter. The jars marked flour, sugar, and tea were really empty, just decoration. The countertop was spotless, like no one had ever eaten a meal here.

She wandered into the den and turned on the TV. Passed the movie channels, with their late night porn specials. She settled for MTV, playing the videos no one wanted to see during the day and repeating old episodes of “The Real World.”