

Deleted Scene: *Bethany visits James*

No one else was up by the time Bethany had eaten breakfast, showered, and dressed for the day. It was probably best they didn't know where she was going.

She somehow managed to get her bike out of the mess in the garage without getting herself too dirty, even though she was only wearing a hooded sweatshirt from Darlene's college and a pair of jeans that hadn't been washed in a month or so. The air in the tires was low, but Bethany hopped on and rolled out of her driveway anyway, the rusty chain clicking through gears. It had been about four years since Bethany had used the bike to meet up with Jana during the summers. It was colored garish purple and hot pink, but it made the trip to James's house much quicker.

The closer she got, the more her hands wanted to turn the bike around and her feet wanted to peddle fast and far away. Finally she could see the mailbox, rusted red and crooked to one side because of some Halloween vandals a couple years back. Then she could see James's car on the lawn, parked haphazardly in the melting snow, patches of dirt showing. The layers of snow and frost on the car's roof and hood made Bethany wonder when was the last time he drove it. When was the last snowfall? A week and a half ago?

The driveway was empty. Bethany wondered if James's mom and stepfather had to work or something. It was a holiday. Bethany parked the bike near the front steps and rang the doorbell.

She stood in the cold waiting for five minutes, occasionally ringing the doorbell, before she decided to just go in. The front door wasn't locked.

The Hills' house looked as usual—dark and messy. Not just cluttered-messy like her own house sometimes looked before the cleaning lady came in; the Hills had a weeks' worth of dirty dishes by the sink, and several pans half-full of food on the floor for the dogs. In the living room piles of newspapers crowded the corners and the tables held a collection of empty glasses, plates, and beer bottles, with overflowing ashtrays dotting the mess. A pile of shoes

and boots lay near the front door, where Bethany stood, and muddy tracks criss-crossed the living room carpet. The whole place stank like cat shit and piss, except for anywhere near the litter box. Bethany carefully made her way through the living room and around to the basement door. She knocked hesitantly.

“Usually when someone doesn’t answer the doorbell, it means they want to fucking be left alone!” James’s voice was raw and more angry than Bethany had ever heard.

“I—I’m sorry,” Bethany said softly. Her hand had slipped away from the doorknob. She didn’t know why she suddenly felt like crying. “I just wanted to see you... I haven’t seen you in a long time...”

Bethany sniffed and pressed her hands to her eyes. She swallowed hard. She didn’t want him to see her cry. In the basement there were shuffling noises, then James said, “Bethany?”

“Yeah?”

He didn’t say anything else. She waited, then opened the door, too loud on its unoiled hinges. Her footsteps echoed on the hollow bare wooden steps.

She was descending into dimness. The basement’s only light came from the two small windows high up on the wall, dirty on the outside and cobwebbed on the inside. She could barely make out James’s body under the covers of his bed in the corner. The basement room was freezing, and practically bare. James’s stereo and TV were gone. His room had always been much neater than the rest of the house, but it now looked uninhabited.

“Um... hi,” Bethany said.

James signed and sat up. “Why did you really come here? You want your money back, right?”

He looked a lot thinner than usual. “No,” Bethany said. “I just—you haven’t been in school for, like, a month.”

He stared at her. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re dressed all weird and you dyed your hair.”

“Oh.” Bethany looked down at her hands. “I don’t know.”

He kept staring at her. Then he said, “Come here.” He held his arms out.

She went and sat beside him, let him put his arms around her. “You look a lot different this way,” James said, his face in her hair. “Still pretty... prettier.” He kissed her head through her hair.

“I wish...” Bethany started.

“What?” he whispered.

“I wish you and Genn weren’t going out,” Bethany said, her voice breaking into a sob at the end. She put the heels of her hands over her eyes. She had to reach over James’s arm around her to do it. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay,” James said. He brushed her hair aside and kissed her cheek. With his arm he pulled her hands away and wrapped her closer to him. He kissed her eyes and then her mouth, even though she had to keep sniffing the snot back.

“But—But—” Bethany tried to say, but then his tongue was in her mouth. With her hands she hesitantly touched both sides of his face. His stubble tickled her palms. She stroked his sideburns and he slipped one hand behind her neck. It felt good and cool back there.

“But nothing,” James whispered, pulling away from her mouth to suck on her neck. She used her sleeve to wipe her nose. It was then that Bethany noticed the welt on James’s bare torso.

“What’s that from?” she asked, already knowing the answer. He pulled away immediately and turned away from her. He stared straight ahead. She could just see his back, with lines of bruises and welts like the one she saw on his side, square against his ribcage.

“Why did he do it?” Bethany asked.

James got up and picked a T-shirt out of his laundry basket, jerked it on over his head.

“Because of the drugs?”

James had been reaching down for a pair of jeans to wear over his boxers, but he stopped and looked at her. “Drugs?”

“Jase said Genn got arrested for using heroin and you were doing it too,” Bethany explained, her voice getting more and more quiet.

“Is that why you really came? You think I’m a fucking drug addict?” James yelled. “What the fuck!” He turned and punched the wall.

Bethany’s hand crept around to hold onto her stomach. She held her own waist tight. She felt like her shaking was going to erupt.

“Is everyone talking about me? They all think I’m fucked up?” James demanded. Bethany just looked at him.

“I don’t know, James. I’m sorry—” Bethany stuttered. Her chin quivered involuntarily.

“Oh, don’t you start crying again! You come down here acting like I should feel bad for you and you think I’m a fucking drug addict! Christ!”

Bethany clenched her teeth together, then yelled, “How was I supposed to know? You take two hundred dollars from me without saying what it’s for then you disappear for a month! How was I supposed to know? It’s just what Jase said!”

James’s head dropped back to look in his laundry basket. He looked a lot younger than seventeen, with his T-shirt and boxers showing his skinny limbs, the lost expression on his face. Then he took a sharp breath and tears were streaming down his face. “Yeah,” he said, standing there crying.

The dust motes swam in the light from the windows. Bethany wanted to go to James and hug him. But she didn’t. She just watched him cry. Her outburst had brought on more shaking.

“It just—It made me feel better. You know?” James’s voice was thin, ready to crack. “I guess we did it too much. But once you do it you feel so happy you don’t want to do anything else. Genn made me ask you for money to buy more. And we did it all the time. When we were high I liked being with Genn. I hated her when I wasn’t. And when my dad found out... it all fell apart...” James’s tears were dripping off his chin, into his laundry basket. “I

wished things could be like they were before.” James looked at Bethany then. “You know?”

She didn’t know how she hadn’t been able to tell, all those times she was with him since August, that he was doing something other than pot. But she looked at him and said, “I know.”

“So Genn got arrested at school. Her mom called my mom. And then Jerry searched my room and found the stuff. Genn’s trial is in a couple of days. Genn called to tell me she won’t get me in trouble as long as I visit her in detox. That was when Jerry did... that.”

“...because Genn wanted you to visit her?”

“Yeah, and I said I didn’t ever want to see her again.” James slumped over to the bed again and sat beside Bethany, ran a hand through his hair and wiped his face with his arm. “So it’s been pretty bad.” He took a shaky breath.

Bethany hugged him, and he hugged back.

Darlene was in the shower and Mr. and Mrs. Caleb were still in bed when Bethany got home. It was good that way. She went into her room and crawled into bed.

Tomorrow she had to go back to school, but she didn’t know if James would be there or not. She didn’t know if James wanted to go out with her or not. He said he wasn’t happy with Genn, but that didn’t have anything to do with her. She wasn’t sure if she should feel better or not. Something still felt wrong, worry deep in her stomach.

Burying herself under the covers, she tried to sleep through the remainder of her Christmas vacation.