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112,735 words

Diana

by

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The yells of students burst from the halls and classrooms and pressed into the yard. Byron Macintyre was carried along with the crowd. He just wanted to get to lunch. He rolled his eyes and kept up with the moving mob. The halls of their old school building were not very wide, and the lockers on either side made them smaller. The high school didn't have that many students, but when they were all out of class and moving in one direction, it was nearly impossible to travel anywhere else. Byron figured he would just wait until he could get outside the doors, then he could duck back to his locker, the cafeteria, and then the library.

Byron was tall, but he still couldn't see what was going on ahead. Out of exasperation, he yelled over the noise of the crowd, "What's going on?"

From beside him, one of the sophomore girls laughed, "It's that girl Diana. The stinky skank, who wears crappy clothes."

Yeah, Byron knew about Diana. Everyone knew about Diana. She was never very far from trouble with teachers, students, or parents. She didn't have any friends, but she usually kept a low profile.

Sure enough, when Byron spilled out into the yard with the other students, Jack had Diana by her long stringy hair. Diana was tall, but there wasn't much to her. She was skinny and lanky. Her clothing was always plain and usually dirty. She had on ragged blue jeans and a plain white shirt. The shirt was slightly threadbare. She didn't have much up top, but you could tell she didn't wear a bra—probably didn't think she needed one. Her long black hair covered her face, but there wasn't much to that either. Her face wasn't hard to look at, but usually she hid it in her hair by keeping her face down. She wasn't making a sound, but a lot of others were. Byron pushed his way to the front.

Dan held Diana's arm. He put his pimply face in hers and yelled, "Thought you could just take it, didn't you?" He twisted her arm and Diana flinched. She turned slightly until Jack's hold on her hair stopped her.

Byron took a step forward, "What's up Dan, Jack?"

Dan glanced quickly up at Byron. His eye twitched, "Don't interfere Macintyre. She stole Sherrill's lunch. We're sure she took Jane's the day before. She's been taking lunches since the beginning of school. We just finally caught her at it this time."

"How'd you do that?"

Dan twisted Diana's hand around and squeezed it open. "Take a look," he grinned, "red handed."

Diana's hand was stained blue.

"Put that powder from the last chemistry lab on the handle," he showed his teeth again, "add a little water, and the blue hand shows who touched it."

Byron put out his arm, "That's enough, Dan, Jack. Just tell her to keep her hands off other people's lunches and let her go."

Jack shook his head, “That won’t be enough for her. She’ll do it again unless we teach her a good lesson.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Sherrill has to get her piece, and Jane.”

Byron glanced at Jane then Sherrill. Jane shook her head. Sherrill tossed her hair, “That’s enough for me. She didn’t get my lunch. Diana, you keep your hands off my stuff—you hear?”

Dan had Diana’s arm behind her back, and Jack twisted her head back with her hair. Her face was turned upwards and her eyes were squeezed shut.

Byron addressed the girl, “What do you say, Diana?”

Dan twisted her arm a little more. Diana flinched. Dan squinted, “She won’t say anything. She never says anything. Just slinks around and steals stuff.” He turned a little more toward Sherrill, which twisted Diana’s arm a bit more. Byron thought her arm looked close to breaking—still Diana didn’t make a sound. Dan nodded to Sherrill, “Sherrill, pop her one. That’s your right and that’ll teach her.”

Sherrill stepped forward, took a look at Byron, and stepped back, “You do it. I’m done.”

Without any warning, Jack pulled back his fist and tugged Diana’s hair toward it. His fist met her cheek with a crack, and she sagged forward. Dan’s hold was the only thing that kept her from falling flat on her face. He released her arm, and she flopped forward into the dirt.

Sherrill scowled, “She didn’t admit to anything. Pants her. That’ll teach her.”

Dan reached down and grabbed the back of Diana’s pants. She didn’t have a belt on. He tugged down and half bared her buttocks. Byron moved quickly, “That’s enough Dan. You made your point.”

Sherrill laughed, “She doesn’t have any underwear on.” She pointed, “Look at that. I thought she was low, but I had no idea she was like that.”

At the edges of the crowd a call went up, “Teacher. Beat it.”

The group began to quickly disperse. Jack, Dan, Sherrill, and Jane were instantly gone. Byron knelt next to Diana. He tugged her pants back up and rolled her over. He hadn’t been this close to her before. Her face was thin and pale—Byron couldn’t tell how much was her own complexion and how much was due to shock or injury. A bruise already formed on her cheek. She was breathing raggedly. Her white shirt was dirty and stained. The seam at her shoulder had ripped and showed her bare shoulder. Byron grimaced when he looked at her face. He put his arm behind her neck and pulled her into a sitting position. Her head lolled on his shoulder.

Behind him, he heard the deep voice of Coach Patterson, “She all right, Mr. Macintyre?”

Byron shook his head, “I don’t know? She took a punch to the face.”

“Justified, I heard. She’s a real troublemaker”

“Probably. That why you took so long?”

“Yeah, the teachers agreed to let it go a little further than usual. She deserved a lesson. It wasn’t just the student’s lunches she was taking.”

“Was it Mr. Madison’s idea to put the ferrous powder on Sherrill’s lunchbox handle?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so, Dan and Jack aren’t smart enough to figure that out on their own.”

Byron put his other arm under Diana’s legs and stood up. She was very light. Probably too light. He moved toward the building, “Whatever, she’s out. A doctor needs to look at her.”

Coach Patterson followed behind him.

Byron carried the girl to the nurse's office. Coach Patterson opened the door for him. Byron laid her on a bed. Mrs. Jones came over right away. She was a petite woman with a little too much flesh. She wore the county's white nurse's uniform. Her features were usually kind, but when she saw who lay on the bed she pulled out a plastic sheet, "Put her on that. I don't want to have to disinfect the bed when I change the sheets."

Byron thought about protesting—he didn't. He lifted Diana up and Nurse Jones slid the plastic sheet under the girl. Byron stood and cleared his throat, "She's knocked out cold. She probably needs a doctor."

Nurse Jones' face went through a couple of contortions, "If she doesn't wake in a few minutes, I'll call the hospital." Her tone said she might not even do that.

Coach Patterson shrugged his shoulders. He glanced at his watch, "I've got to get to class. Thanks for taking care of things Byron. That way I didn't have to." He exited quickly.

Nurse Jones returned to her desk.

Byron stared at her for a moment, "Aren't you going to do something for her?"

"What could I do for her?"

"Check to see if she has a concussion or something—I don't know? You could do something."

Nurse Jones smiled, "You're kind of new here, Mr. Macintyre. There is not much we can do with or for Ms. Goewyn."

"Is that her name? It's a little unusual."

"Fits her."

"What did she do to irritate you?"

“She steals things. For some reason, she can’t keep her hands off of other people’s stuff.

The problem is that she is a pretty good thief, but she does it so often, everyone knows where to look.”

“If she is such a good thief, it doesn’t seem to do her any good.”

“Yeah, isn’t that funny.”

“What about counseling?”

“What about psychiatric help? She’s had it all. Doesn’t seem to do any good. She usually doesn’t say a word.”

“How does she stay in school?”

“She does her work. She usually keeps her nose clean. She gets beat up like this once or twice a month. That usually slows it down a little. I stopped patching her up when I caught her taking the drugs from my safe.”

“From the safe?”

“Yeah, I told her I would turn her in the next time. And, there hasn’t been a next time.”

“I mean, from the safe. How could she get into your safe?”

Nurse Jones smirked and shook her head, “She has more skills than you might want to imagine.”

“Maybe she takes lunches because she’s hungry.”

The nurse shook her head, “She won’t take the school’s food. She isn’t signed up for any of the free meal programs. She always looks like she could eat something, but she won’t take the food, and she won’t talk about it.” Nurse Jones stretched, “It’s my break. I’m going to get some coffee. You can stay here or go. Just pull the door shut behind you. Everything’s locked up in here. She can’t take much when she wakes.”

The nurse stood and left the office. The door shut and locked with a click behind her. Byron studied the girl's face a little more. The bruise was spreading. Her eye was swelling shut. He noticed now, her lip was bleeding. He should be in class, and he wasn't sure what he was doing right now.

Byron took a clean cloth and a cold pack. He bent the cold pack to make it start chilling and wetted the cloth. He wiped Diana's face. The cloth came back covered with blood and grime. He laid it over the bruise on her cheek and put the cold pack on it. After a few moments, her eyes opened wide. They moved from side to side as if they searched for some threat then settled on his for a moment. She reached up and felt her face. She touched the cold pack and winced. Byron noticed for the first time that her arm was bruised too. Dan's finger marks were clear on it and a bruise already turned her wrist black and blue.

Byron looked in her eyes and stared. He couldn't imagine why he had ever thought her face might be plain. He guessed that he had never looked closely at her. Her hair usually covered her features. Her eyes were the deepest blue. They were as blue as blue could be. That was a strange contrast to her hair which was silky black, but her eyes were as blue as a pool in sea ice. He could tell now her face and skin were just lightly colored. It was white like skin that no sunshine had ever touched. There was no sign of a tan at all. He suddenly had an urge to feel her skin to see if it was as cold as it looked. He put out his hand and touched her arm. She was warm and not cold at all.

Diana turned her face toward his hand with obvious disapproval, and he quickly pulled it back. Byron put up his hands, "Sorry. I brought you here. No one else seems to care if you live or die."

She pulled the cold pack and cloth off her face and sat up with a sigh.

“They tore your shirt.”

She felt it and frowned. She ignored him and swung her feet off the bed. Byron just had time to move out of her way. She stood. She came up to his chin. Byron was tall and broad shouldered. He usually played soccer and basketball. He had been the captain for the basketball team last school year. He was the captain of the soccer team this year. He was dark haired himself, but it was dark brown and not black. He had gray eyes and strong features. Most people told him he was handsome, but he didn't think much about it. Byron didn't touch her. He moved out of her way, “Where are you going? It's almost fifth period.”

She swayed a little and started to fall. Byron caught her and laid her back on the bed. He put the cloth on her face and the cold pack on it again. He took another cold pack and placed it on her wrist. That seemed to be the part of her arm that was bruised the worst.

The girl woke again. She gazed around and pursed her lips when she saw Byron. Byron gave her a look of concern, “Nurse Jones went to get a cup of coffee. I don't think you should get up again—not until you feel better.”

Diana pulled the cold packs from her face and arm and sat up. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and waited a moment. Her head bent forward, and she slipped to her knees on the floor. Byron caught her shoulders. Her shirt ripped more. She bowed her head and retched. At that moment, Nurse Jones came through the door, “Not on my floor. Diana! Ms. Goewyn. Byron get her to the toilet.”

Diana only retched a couple of times. A thin dribble of bile trickled from her lips—but that was all. Byron wiped it with the cloth and pulled her back onto the bed. He shook his head, “You shouldn't get up for a while.” He turned to the nurse, “She obviously has a concussion. You have to get her to some medical help.”

The nurse came over to the bed. She distastefully gazed at Diana, "Open your eyes wide." She glanced at Diana's eyes and flashed a pencil light in them. "Her pupils aren't pinpointed and they show good reaction. Ms. Goewyn, you know how this goes. You're all right. When you can get up, I want you out of my infirmary. I'm not leaving you alone until you get out of here."

Diana's lips formed a hard line. She sat up very slowly this time and slowly swung her legs over the side. She very carefully stood and took one slow step after another to the door. Byron let out a large sigh and followed her. He stayed very close to her. It was good he did. The moment the door closed behind them, Diana's hands went forward, and she started to fall. Byron grabbed her to keep her from hitting the floor. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She collapsed against him for a moment. Then she pulled her feet under her and pushed him away. Byron ran his hand over his face, "Wait one minute."

Diana half turned.

"Yeah, you. Stop. You're an idiot. I don't know how you alienated everyone. I don't know how I got involved in this, but I can't just let you go stumbling across campus like this. Come on. I'll make sure you get back home. Can we call your mother?"

Diana shook her head, negative.

"Your father?"

She shook her head again.

"Anyone?"

She snorted.

"Do you have a car, a bike...?" he knew she didn't. He had to ask.

Byron took Diana's unbruised arm and gently led her toward his locker, "I have to get my stuff. I'll make sure you get back home." He made her stand beside him while he unlocked his

locker. He pulled out his book bag and the books he'd need for this evening. He took his lunch bag. It was still full. His stomach growled. "If I can get you home quickly, I might make it back to school for sixth period. If not, I have everything I need." To himself, he whispered, "I'll get the homework from Joe."

Her ears perked up.

Byron looked carefully at her. She didn't seem like she was about to keel over again, "What do you need from your locker? Do you need to get something from it?"

She slowly and carefully shook her head.

"Okay. Let's go." Byron took her good arm, and she began to walk.

They went out of the school and headed toward the back fields. A couple of physical education classes were going on, but they ignored them. Coach Patterson waved at Byron and Byron waved back. Diana didn't acknowledge anything. At the back of the fields, they came to a red dirt track. Diana followed this and Byron stayed at her side. The trail was barely wide enough for them both to walk abreast. Byron was shoulder to shoulder with her. She seemed steady, but he didn't want her to fall again. It was still early fall, and the day was warm. The trail went a long way into the woods. Trees were sparse and the ground overgrown with nettles and brush. Honeysuckles and blackberry bushes alternated on either side. Byron had to step closer to the girl than he really wanted to. He hadn't noticed before, but she did smell. It wasn't the smell of an unclean person, but it was pungent none-the-less. It was a scent like wet damp soil and hot drying cotton. It wasn't really unpleasant, but it was obvious the smell came from her.

They moved further and further into the woods, and all around them, Byron could hear the shuffle of animals hidden by the foliage. They were pretty active for this time of day. He

listened carefully for the sound of snakes, and though he heard a few, they weren't close to the path.

Byron could make out the scent of the bayou not that far away. The ground sloped down and he knew they headed toward it. He didn't notice the bugs he thought he should this close to the water. The sunshine still wove its way through the trees and shifted on the green covered ground. The honeysuckles and blackberry bushes had given way to smaller trees and low brush. The trail still led through the thick foliage. As they came around a small hill covered with sunshine and honeysuckles, an old tarpaper house came in sight. Diana headed straight for it and Byron, still holding to her arm, followed.

She paused at the door only a moment. It was held shut with only an old wooden peg and a frayed rope loop. Diana unlatched the door and pushed it open. She went inside and Byron entered with her. Inside the tarpaper building was a single room. The floor was dirt, and wet in places. There was a low dirty bed in one corner and a low table in the center of the floor. Chunks of wood and pieces of cardboard ringed the table. They were obviously the only places to sit. Next to the bed were stacks of books. The books were kept well above the floor by large concrete bricks. The books lined one whole side of the small building. On the other side was a pump sink and a wood stove. Ancient rotten cupboards lined the wall above them. Diana closed the door and the light came from a couple of almost opaque glass windows. The windows were large enough and the sun bright enough that the small house was illuminated. On the table sat a kerosene lantern. The room was slightly musty with the smell of kerosene.

Diana glanced at him and nodded to a wood piece at the table. She took his bag and placed it on a piece of cardboard on the floor. He watched her carefully to see that she didn't sway then

sat down, "I really should be going. Why don't you lie down, and I'll go. I don't think you should be standing so much."

She ignored him and took a large metal bowl from near the door. It was covered with strange markings. They looked like runic writing to Byron. She filled the bowl from the pump sink and brought it to the table. She placed it at his feet and took hold of his right tennis shoe. Byron sat up and pulled his foot back, "What are you doing? What is this?"

She just stared at him and took his shoe again. She untied it and pulled it off. She pulled off his sock. She washed his foot. Then did the same with his other foot. When she was finished, she put the bowl to the side.

She knelt at the table and opened her mouth, "I'm sorry I don't have any salt or bread to offer you."

Byron stared at her. Her voice was soft and melodic. It had a strange undertone he couldn't place. The accent was odd. It reminded him of a British speaker, but it didn't exactly sound that way either. He cocked his head, "Why bread and salt?"

"To welcome and thank you. No one has ever helped me before. I'm afraid I am obliged to you, and I didn't want to be."

"Obliged?"

She didn't say anything.

"Surely, someone helped you before."

She turned him a slight smile, "Not even the nurse would help me. Didn't you think this odd?"

"Is this really where you live?"

"It is."

“Aren’t you afraid here?”

“No one can hurt me here. This is my place.”

“What about food?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Is that why you steal lunches? Are you hungry?”

She pressed her lips tightly together.

He reached over to his bag and opened the top. He pulled out his lunch bag. It was slightly crushed. He took out a couple of sandwiches and two apples. His mother had packed it for him that morning.

The girl took a deep breath and pressed her lips more tightly together.

“Would you like to have this?”

Her stomach growled.

“Take it.”

Her eyes became slightly desperate, “Is it a gift?”

Byron paused, “What do you want it to be?”

Her eyes took on a look of steel, “Please say it is a gift to me. Say my name.”

Byron sat back, “This is a gift to Diana.”

She flinched, “I can’t accept it. That isn’t my name.”

“What?”

“Please. That is not my name.” Her stomach growled again.

“Why can’t you take this? I’m giving it to you.”

“No, not just giving. Please, say it is a gift to me and use my name.”

“What is your name?”

A look of great relief came over her face and she sighed. The smile she gave him could have melted stone, "I am Dana-ana Goewyn, but if you just say Dana, everything will be appeased."

"Appeased?" Byron took a breath, "Very well, this is a gift to Dana."

"Thank you," her voice trembled.

"Go ahead. Take it." Byron handed the sandwich to her.

Dana ripped the plastic bag off the sandwich and crammed it into her mouth.

"Wait. Stop."

She glanced at him with scared eyes. She swallowed without chewing, "You aren't going to take it back are you?"

"No, I just don't want you to get sick. You barfed about an hour ago. You probably have a concussion." Before he finished speaking, the sandwich had disappeared. "You were hungry?"

She didn't say anything.

"Look. You can have the other one too."

"Is it a gift?"

Byron frowned, "I don't understand any of this. Okay, Dana, this is a gift for you." He handed the sandwich to her.

"Thank you." She ate it so fast she almost choked.

Byron gave a laughing sigh, "These apples are also a gift for Dana."

"Thank you," she sighed. Then she handed an apple back to him. "Please take this apple Byron Macintyre as a gift from me Dana. I give it to your hand to do as you please."

"Thank you." Byron bit into the apple and a taste like the most perfect fruit filled his mouth. The flavor was effervescent and fresh. It was like the most perfect apple from the most perfect

tree eaten with dew on its firm crisp skin. He glanced up in surprise at her, and she returned a mischievous grin.

His eyes widened, “What did you do? What is all this about?”

She gave a half smile, but didn’t say anything.

“I really want to know.”

She just looked at him with a winsome expression.

“Very well. I need to return for last period. That way I can get the homework for tomorrow.”

She sat up, “I should go back too.”

“You should not go back to school. What are your classes? I’ll try to get the assignments for you.”

“I already have the assignments for today. You don’t need to get them for me.”

“How could you do that?”

She didn’t say anything.

Byron tugged on his socks and sneakers, “I’ll see you tomorrow at school. If anyone gives you trouble, come to me right away.”

“Are you sure you wish to burden yourself in this way Byron Macintyre?”

Usually, he would have asked what she meant, but instead he picked up his bag, “I wish to burden myself for you Dana-ana Goewyn.”

She gazed up at him and clapped her hands, “Those are the words. Those are the exact words.”

As Byron opened the door, he noticed there was a latch on the other side. It was similar to the one on the front. When he opened the door, he told her, “Get to bed and rest.” He pulled it

shut and she was suddenly on the other side. Byron tapped the front of the door, “Don’t’ forget to latch your door.”

Byron started down the thin path to the house. He turned around more than once before he reached the honeysuckle covered hillock that hid the house from the trail. The bugs seemed to be much thicker than when he came.

