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The Bear

By Jenny Lauren Meyer

Morgan *still* couldn't believe what had happened. *She* should have been in that car too. But now, two weeks later, here she was, 15 year old Morgan Bradford living in the present, while her family remained a vivid memory from the past.

"Morgan?", Nellie's high-pitched voice called. "Are you ready to pick up your stuff from home?". *No*, she was *not* ready to go *home*. What was *home*, anyway? A place to live? A house full of people? A family with two cats and a dog? Morgan no longer had any of these things, much less a home.

Nellie stepped into the room, her thick, white "old-lady" shoes padding against the shiny wooden floor.

"C'mon hon," the 66 year old woman pleaded, "we have to get to your Aunt Jean's by five o' clock sharp."

Duh, thought Morgan. Even an old senile lady like Nellie had enough marbles left to know that they'd never get from Springfield, Missouri, to Portsmouth, Virginia, in six hours. *Especially* driving 20 miles below the speed limit.

Morgan slowly pushed her frail body out of Nellie's Lazy-Boy recliner. Checking her appearance in the out-dated vanity mirror on the wall, Morgan couldn't believe how terrible she looked. Her long black hair hadn't been brushed in days and her sensitive pale skin shimmered with grease. *What have I done to myself?*, Morgan thought as Nellie guided her down the steep front steps and up the cracked walkway to her own house. She dug into her dirty jeans pocket and her hand returned with the Bradfords' house key. But there was only *one* Bradford left; now it was just Morgan's house key.

When the lock clicked, the durable wooden door creaked open and the stale air tickled Morgan's nose. It was as if no one had ever lived in this house, as if there never were six happy people growing up together inside. For all Morgan knew, it might as well have been that way.

"I'll be next door if you need me," stated Nellie.

Duh, Morgan thought. *You've been our...my next door neighbor for years*. Morgan drew in a deep breath and cautiously ventured into her house. Nothing had changed, not that she expected it to. The little family room in front of her was in perfect order, right down to the Better Homes and Gardens magazines resting on the glass coffee table. Mom always arranged them in chronological order. Claudia's "colonial" room was still in the same place, right beside Morgan's, and the half bathroom in the hall still smelled of soapsuds. But the cavity of the house remained motionless; there were no forks clanking against dishes in the kitchen (where food was now rotting in the refrigerator),

there was no dog barking, no telephone ringing, no people laughing. The awkward silent hollowness of the house gave Morgan the chills. She decided it would be best to get it over with as soon as possible, so she rushed to her room and dumped all of her clothes into a rumpled old duffel bag. There was no use in folding them. Aunt Jean would no doubt send every single article of clothing Morgan owned to the cleaners as soon as she arrived, *including* her underwear. Great-Aunt Jean was such a prim, strict soul that Morgan dreaded having to go live with her. Why, over the phone Aunt Jean had even announced that she was immediately sending Morgan to a boarding school! *A boarding school!* Morgan was already being forced to move away from all her friends, but now *this!* Well, at least the drive to Aunt Jean's wouldn't be so bad. Nellie had volunteered to drive Morgan there, and she loved hearing the lively old lady's stories.

As soon as all her drawers were emptied, Morgan grabbed her great-grandfather's precious keepsake tin from on top of her dresser. Her great-grandfather had kept many special things in it when he was a child, and today, priceless memories gathered up dust inside: Morgan's first lost tooth, the cats' cradle string she and her best friend had toyed with for months, half the ticket from the movies when she had gone on her first date, and other unique items which Morgan simply could not live without. After hesitantly stuffing a photo album into her duffel bag, Morgan zipped it up and was ready to go. But for some unknown reason, Morgan couldn't leave. *Something*, a strange wave of emotions swept over her and was holding her back. A strong invisible force drew Morgan toward the attic.

She silently dropped her duffel bag at the foot of the stairs and carefully made her way up the hollow wooden steps. With each creak of the stairs, Morgan's heart raced faster. The feeble pegboard door stood right in front of her now and was so inviting it seemed to shout, "*Open me! Open me!*" Morgan wrapped her long, slender fingers around the tiny doorknob and pushed, but the door was stuck. With all her might, Morgan threw her intense body at the door and swung it open.

From her position on the rough attic floor where she had fallen, Morgan looked up. Wonders surrounded her, and as she scaled the room with dancing eyes, Morgan suddenly became alive again. Remembering her place on the floor, Morgan stood up and brushed herself off. She hadn't talked in days, but now she wanted to sing! It was as if Morgan was in touch with herself again.

Light glistened on the dust through the little diamond-shaped window and shone on all of the magnificent things piled up in the attic. Childhood memories filled the flat air with delight. From charming little music boxes to baseball gloves, everything in the attic room was awesome. Suddenly Morgan frowned. *I don't have time for this*, she thought.

Nellie and I have to leave for Aunt Jean's and the realtors and Salvation Army people are coming at noon to sell all of my family history away. So why am I so excited? My family is gone forever and there's nothing I can do to change that. Morgan turned away from the sacred attic room and the happiness that had once been inside her. She put her hand on the door and was about to close it, about to seal up the gigantic keepsake box that held all of her most valuable memories inside, when she saw *him*. He was being squashed between an old-fashioned train set and a heavy chest full of glamorous costumes. It was her teddy bear! Morgan hadn't seen that bear in years! She plopped down on her stiff knees in front of him and picked him up.

His limp body was once brown but had faded to a pale yellow color from age. A faint scent wafted to Morgan's nose. It was her father's cologne! The familiar spicy smell comforted her and she rubbed the bear's cool fur against her cheek. Morgan remembered the day she and Daddy bought the bear from T.W. Toys on Jerome Street. She was four years old and Daddy said she had been such a good girl about Claudia being born that she could pick out an early Christmas present. She had chosen this bear, whom the lady at the counter had called an "oatmeal bear."

Morgan studied his funny face. His left eye had been plucked off by her older brother Steven when they were little. Steven insisted upon making the shiny black eye a helmet for his G.I. Joe action figure. Morgan was crushed when Mom explained there was no way to repair it and she couldn't sew it back on.

The bear's ears were ragged and crusty from baby Scottie's sucking on them after he was born. Scottie hadn't gotten a teething ring yet, so the Bradfords figured the ancient bear would do.

A faint red ribbon had been hastily tied around the bear's flat neck, a result of Morgan's sister Claudia's "fashion enterprise." The defiant eight-year-old had claimed the bear needed some color in his face to spruce him up, and she put the ribbon on when Mom denied her constant requests to use blush-on.

A victim of the cats' and dog's fight one day, the bear's chest was torn open, allowing billowy clumps of stuffing to fall out. A piece of *everyone* was in that bear. Morgan held him tight and sobbed.

"I should have been in the car with you!" she screamed. **"Oh Mom, Dad, I'm so sorry! Claud, Scottie, Steven, I love you so much! Why did you have to go? Why did a drunk driver have to hit you?"**

Morgan cried and cried and after she couldn't squeeze any more tears out, she got up with the bear in her arms. She knew it wasn't her fault that her family was killed, and she realized that no matter how much it hurt, she would have to move on.

As long as Morgan had that bear, she knew that everything would be all right.

As Morgan held the bear tightly, walking down the stairs, she was surprised to see Nellie at the bottom, holding out her duffel bag. Morgan wiped her tears away, stood up straight, took a deep breath and whispered, "I'm ready to go."