



11:00 a.m.

I'd spent my life waiting for the day I could move away, but now that it was here, it wasn't exactly living up to the hype.

Seeing Teddy B scrunched in the bottom of the drawer stirred up a lot of feelings that I'd spent the past couple of years trying to forget. I'd caught a quick glimpse of his ear as I pulled the stack of t-shirts out of the dresser—I hadn't exactly forgotten that I'd put him there, but seeing him after all this time gave me a little shock. Glancing toward Kaylie's half-open door, I gently picked him up, examining his worn bow-tie and the clumsy stitches that were straining at the side seam, threatening to expel the shreds of Mom's old pantyhose I'd used as stuffing. As I held him to my chest the faint, sharp smell of smoke seemed to fill the air around us, although I knew I was the only one who'd smell it. Even if the smoke wasn't really inside the bear, it had become part of him—just like the flashing red lights and the chill that crept under the blanket that had been wrapped around my shoulders that early winter morning had become a part of me. In some ways, the almost two years since the fire seemed like forever. In others, it only felt like an instant.

The brown checked bear was the only thing I owned from before. I even got rid of the AC/DC concert shirt and sweats I'd been wearing that night. Ever since Kaylie cleaned out this half of the dresser for me, Teddy B stayed tucked away in the drawer—he was the only physical thing connecting me to the old house and I couldn't stand to look at him most days.

Despite my best efforts, not everything had been reduced to ashes. Weeks after the fire, Kaylie's mom had come to help us slog through the debris as we tried to find any surviving treasures. We all wore heavy work gloves, big rubber boots and masks because of all of the dust that picking through the rubble kicked up. It must have looked like something out of the apocalypse to anyone passing by.

"Hey," Phil called from what used to be the back of the house. "Look what I found!"

I glanced up quickly, my heart racing. Logically, I knew that Mom's remains had been discovered and taken away by the firemen. Like the good daughter I pretended to be, I'd sat in the front row at her funeral, staring at the urn that stood on the table facing the crowded church. The sadness that sat heavy on my chest that day was only outweighed by the ball of guilt alongside it. I worried that every one of the hundreds of people who stopped to give me a hug that day would see the truth in the tears that snaked down my cheeks.

The therapist Kaylie's mom insisted I see the previous week was constantly going on about "closure", but that didn't stop the gut reaction when I realized that Phil was standing near the spot where Mom died. I'd avoided that part of the rubble, worried that the sight of a water-logged National Geographic was going to make me finally spill my guts. "What?" I managed in a fairly normal voice.

He picked a small square box from the ashes and shook it. "I'm not sure. I think it's her jewelry box. One of them anyway."

We all picked our way over to where he was standing as he brushed the dirt and dust off of it. The top was warped from all of the water that had been dumped in a futile attempt to save the house, but it was mostly intact.

"It was buried in a bunch of clothes," he said, looking around at the burned and soggy piles at his feet. "Must have gotten wet enough so that it didn't burn." The hinges cracked and broke apart as he opened the lid, revealing one of Mom's many stashes of costume jewelry.

I picked up a necklace. It was a gold chain interrupted by semi-clear colored stones that Mom used to wear on the rare occasions she went out when I was little. When she'd come home and bend down to kiss me goodnight, I'd run my fingers over the stones like they were some kind of rosary. That

memory made my heart ache, so I dropped the chain back in the box and turned away. “Just junk,” I said. “Nothing valuable.”

Kaylie’s mom quietly picked up the necklace. “I think it’s lovely,” she said. She peered into my face. “Don’t you want to keep it? Maybe you can wear it, you know, when you want to remember.”

I bent down and picked at the remains of a partially burned paperback book. “I don’t want it,” I said, glancing quickly up at them. “I don’t want any of it.”

“Well *I* do,” Sara said, her eyes filling with tears yet again. She’d been crying pretty much non-stop since the fire and it was getting old. She turned to Kaylie’s mom as she held the necklace up. “Mom had so many beautiful things,” she said. “She was a collector, and had spent years and years saving all of the things that she thought we’d like—.” Choking sobs filled her chest and she couldn’t finish.

Kaylie’s mom put her arms around Sara and held her tight. “It’s okay honey. Let it out.” A surprising stab of jealousy ran through me as I watched Sara put her head on her shoulder.

As the sobbing subsided, Sara reverently carried the jewelry box to the growing pile of burned and waterlogged treasures that she’d collected so far. Rather than anything useful, it was mostly the damaged versions of what had been in the house all along—a pile of warped and melted margarine containers, some random pictures with singed edges and a few pieces of damp clothing that we all knew would never lose that campfire smell no matter how many times they were run through the wash. As far as I was concerned, she was welcome to all of it.

I stood up, brushing the ashes off my jeans and glanced around at what was left of the house. Except for a few pieces of charred wood that were somehow still standing upright, the walls were gone. All that was left of the house I’d lived in all my life was the fireplace, piles of blackened boards and the burned-out hulks of the cars in what used to be the garage and the driveway. Even the untrained eye could tell from the amount of debris that this wasn’t a normal house fire. No normal house would leave this much devastation behind.

It didn’t fool the fire department either. The remains of the house were still smoking when I first heard the word “hoarder” whispered by someone wearing a badge. As they dug through what was left of

the house to find what was left of Mom, the fire department knew what they were dealing with and in the end that made it easier on me. Hoarded houses went up in flames all the time. Especially hoarded houses that contained space heaters and faulty electrical cords. It was as simple as that.

These days, everyone knew about Mom's problem. In the years since the fire, there had been seemingly endless TV shows about the disorder and even though it was completely horrifying, I couldn't tear myself away from the screen as people actually explained on camera about the mess they lived in every day. The word "hoarder" still caused a jolt to go through my body, but it was getting better.

At least there was nothing left for me to show anyone, whether they had a camera in their hand or not. It was one thing to say that someone was a hoarder. It was something else to see the piles of clothing and garbage, to feel the damp, musty air, to smell the dust and decay that invaded every aspect of the house and everyone who lived there. The lack of physical evidence took the sting out of the hoarder label and made it just another description. I could almost say it out loud without flinching. Mom was a nurse. Mom was a quilter. Mom was a hoarder.

I gave Teddy B a quick squeeze and then tucked him deep inside the duffle bag among the socks and t-shirts I was taking to college. Pulling both edges together, I struggled against the bulging sides to pull the zipper closed. There was no way I was going to ask Kaylie's mom for another suitcase – my entire life fit neatly into two medium sized duffle bags, which was just the way I liked it.

"Need some help?"

I turned to see Josh leaning against the doorway, and my heart raced like it always did. How was I going to manage not seeing him every day? "Finally," I said, faking exasperation. "You show up right when the hard part is done."

"Letting you drive away is going to be the hard part," he said, walking into the room. He leaned down to kiss me and his arms felt overwhelmingly safe and protective. I sank into his chest and just stayed there for a long moment, listening to his heartbeat and inhaling the warm boy-smell that was all his own. Before I could stop them, tears threatened the corners of my eyes and I pulled back, wiping them away with the palm of my hand.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Josh said, a look of concern crossing his face. “I didn’t mean to make things worse.”

“You didn’t,” I said. “It’s fine. It’s just weird, you know?”

He looked around at my two bags and Kaylie’s ten. “I know.” He sighed, then ran his hand through my hair and stared into my eyes. “But I’ll see you in a couple of weeks, right? Cal Poly’s not far from you guys – I’ll come down to Santa Barbara every weekend.” He smiled. “Or you can come up to San Luis.”

“You don’t have to come down *every* weekend,” I said, trying to give him an out as always.

“But what if I want to come down *every* weekend?” he asked. “Weekdays will be bad enough knowing you’re only an hour away.”

I sighed. “Then I guess I’ll have to put up with it.”

Josh smiled and squeezed my hand. “Damn right you will.” He pointed to the bag I’d been trying to close. “Is that all you’re bringing?”

I nodded to the other black bag on the floor. “That one too. Plus a comforter and some sheets that we bought on the mega shopping trip last week. If I forget anything, Kaylie will be right down the hall.”

“Did you find out any more about the mysterious roommate?”

“Only what she sent me in the email. I looked at some of her pictures online.” I shrugged like living in the same dorm room with a complete stranger wasn’t a big deal. “She seems nice.” The minute we found out that we’d both gotten into Santa Barbara, Kaylie wanted to be roommates, but even though the idea was safe and familiar, I’d insisted we do the dorm lottery like everyone else. Kaylie had been sharing her room with me for the last year and a half and it was way past time for me to get out of her space.

“If she turns out to be crazy, just say the word and I’ll come down and take care of it,” Josh said with a big grin on his face.

“Right,” I said, glancing back at him as I lifted the other duffle onto the bed. “You’ll just take care of it.”

“I will,” he said, traces of hurt in his voice. Josh took both my hands and his. “You don’t believe this, but I’d do anything for you. With everything you’ve been through the past couple of years, you’ve stayed so strong, but it’s okay to ask for help when you need it you know.”

“I know,” I said, turning away as tears started to fill my eyes again. I didn’t want this last day to be all about the past.

He continued quietly. “Just because your mom had a problem doesn’t mean that you have to keep hiding it.” He nodded to the two small bags I had packed. “Or that you can’t own anything. Or that you have to always handle everything by yourself.”

The rumors about Mom had already begun to spread when I finally told Josh the truth about her hoarding. Telling Kaylie had been a lot easier and her mom had been there to back me up, but telling him meant lifting some of my darkest secrets into the sunlight. He’d been so supportive, but part of me wondered if things would be the same if the evidence of Mom’s hoard had still existed. The fire took away all evidence of my old life, but it was the only thing that made this new one possible.

“I don’t always handle everything,” I said. “It’s just—”

“Hey you two,” Kaylie said, opening the door. “Hate to break up the long goodbye but Mom and Dad are ready to pack up the cars and get out of here.”

“It’s fine,” Josh said, giving me one last look. “Besides, it’s not goodbye as much as it is see-you-next-weekend.”

Kaylie pushed past us with a knowing grin on her face. “Let me just grab these first two bags and I’ll get out of your way.”

As she hustled her bags down the stairs, Josh turned to me. “Well, I guess this is it.”

“I guess so.”

“Listen,” he said. “I know you’re not sentimental and I know you don’t like to keep a lot of stuff, but I made you something.”

“You made me something?” I said. Josh wasn’t known for his crafting skills. “You already gave me a new playlist for my iPod.”

“This is different,” he said, reaching into his backpack and pulling out a thin, square, gift-wrapped package.

I took it and ran my hand over the slightly-squashed bow that was fastened onto the front. “What is it?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He watched intently as I unwrapped the package. It was a hardback book with a photo on the front of the two of us at the very first party I’d ever been to. It was taken the night that everything changed, the night that I made a promise to all of us. Seeing it made me inhale sharply.

Josh tilted his head to one side. “Is it okay?” he asked.

I nodded, too afraid to speak. I opened the cover and slowly flipped through the pages. There were pictures of Café Sienna, photos of us just hanging around after school, pictures of us on a double date with Kaylie and Steve, and even some of Christmas morning with Kaylie’s family when Sara and Mark had come over for presents—it was a whole book devoted to my life. At least the past year and a half.

“Since you lost all of your pictures, I thought it might be nice to have these all in one place. I used the ones that I had and Kaylie gave me some of hers too.” Josh turned to the back of the book where an envelope had been glued into place. “And I slipped a few things in here in case you wanted them.”

I reached in and pulled out tickets from that very first movie, a dried rose from a dance junior year and a slightly bent guitar pick. “You’ve been saving all this stuff?”

“Not everything. Just the things that were really important,” he said.

I turned the tickets over and looked at the date. It seemed like a lifetime ago. I had a policy of only keeping things I absolutely needed in order to live and suddenly this seemed to fit that category. I closed the book and slipped it into my backpack. “Thanks,” I said, reaching up to kiss him hard on the mouth. “It’s perfect.”

“Is there anything coming on your side?” Kaylie asked as we pulled into the busy street. The car was packed to the roof with our stuff and there was no way to see out the rear window.

I looked out my window. “Nope, you’re clear.” Kaylie’s parents were in the car behind us and it was going to be up to them to keep up for the next four hours as we drove down the coast. We’d tried to tell them we could go by ourselves but they insisted. I wasn’t sure if it was so much to drop us off at college as it was to get a weekend away in Santa Barbara without her brother.

“Here we go!” Kaylie shouted as we drove away from the house. She glanced at me. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. I sat in silence watching the familiar streets go by, mentally waving to the café, the drycleaners and the supermarket. “Wait,” I said. “Turn here.”

Kaylie didn’t even hesitate, but swung a quick right without a signal which I was sure we were going to hear about from her parents. “You sure?” she asked as we made our way slowly up the street.

I nodded. “One last time.” I hadn’t been here since the day we picked through the rubble and it was all a little different, but fundamentally the same. The Callan’s had put in a new driveway and I could see TJ’s house had been painted a mud brown, except TJ and his mom hadn’t lived there for over a year. I hoped he learned to like his mom’s new husband wherever they’d moved to.

We pulled up to the sidewalk in front of what used to be our house. The “sold” sign was still on the lawn and the weeds were already waist-high all over the lot. Even though the chimney had survived the fire, it had been no match for the bulldozers that had completely erased any sign of our old house in the months that followed. Without insurance, there was no money to rebuild, and my portion of the money that we got from selling the land was only enough for about a year’s tuition. Dad had better come through with the rest like he’d promised.

Kaylie leaned over to look through the passenger window. “When are the new people going to start building?”

I watched the real estate sign swaying in the breeze. “Sara said everything was final, so I guess any day now. We had to wait for Phil to come back from his teaching gig in Indonesia to sign some papers so it took forever.”

“It’s going to be weird coming back and seeing a new house here,” she said.

I nodded, but honestly, a new house couldn’t get here fast enough for me. I always felt guilty when I thought about this empty lot, the slight indentation in the earth where the foundation of my entire life used to be. On the outside, I’d gotten away with it all, but in reality it was just another secret that sat heavily on my chest when I allowed my mind to wander back here. A new house on our old lot would be a fresh start for everyone and maybe someday the memories of that night would fade. I knew by heart the story of how I woke up to find the flames already heading down the hall, how I’d run through the house calling for Mom until the heat and the smoke drove me outside. I wondered how many times a story had to be told before it became the truth. A hundred? A thousand?

I turned away from the overgrown empty lot and faced forward in my seat. “Let’s go.”

Kaylie was silent as she pulled away from the curb and swung a u-turn in the middle of the street, watching to make sure her parents were still following. I glanced back, knowing it was the last time I’d come here.

My favorite All American Rejects song came on the radio so I leaned over and cranked it up while Kaylie grinned and began to sing along. I sat back in my seat and rolled the window all the way down, the warm August breeze on my face as we drove away.