

One night, a girl awoke from inside her small home. She had a feeling to leave the house, to run to the woods. She didn't know why she wanted to sneak away, but she knew who she'd be meeting there. Connor always met her there on nights like this. But it was always a different reason as to why.

Ember sat up in bed, her long brown hair cascading down her face. She realized she had fallen asleep in her clothes. Reading again, as usual. She swung her legs off of the bed and slipped on a pair of shoes. She tugged the window open and slid through it, into the cold snow. She shivered, drawing her jacket more tightly around her as she took a step into her footprints from yesterday. She followed the prints until they turned to the back of the house. She sighed and stepped into the fresh, glittering snow, breaking the soft sheet of ice covering each step. She knew she'd be home before her mother and her younger sister awoke. She neared the forest, looking at the tree's bare branches as she walked. The snow was overwhelmingly beautiful on the branches, the moon overlooking the forest and the small cabin she lived in with her mother and her little sister. The light from the full moon made the snow glitter more as she walked over it; it was sad she had to ruin such a masterpiece.

When she reached the forest, the snow trailed away until there was no possible way it could have fallen through the canopy made up of the trees branches. She broke out into a run now, heading for the center of the woods, the largest tree for miles. She saw the tree and slowed.

"I knew you'd come." Connor said softly. He knew she'd had no choice, really, but at least she was eager to see him. He dropped from the lowest branch of the tree in front of her, his brown hair almost equivalent to Ember's in color, landing in a perfect sort of wave across his forehead. His green eyes pierced her through easily, but there was softness to them as well.

"Why did I, though?" Ember asked, questioningly. "Why did you?"

"That's always the question, isn't it?" Connor grinned. "This time it'll be an adventure."

"Have you met with Lucie yet?"

Connor nodded. "Just a bit ago. Such an imagination, she has."

Ember tsked. "Sleeping in class, and she's only nine, I'm rubbing off on her too much." she joked. She knew that when Connor needed to speak with them, they fell asleep quickly. It wasn't their choice. That's the only way she met with Connor. The only

way that was possible. Dreams. Connor was an imaginary friend... Someone to have dream adventures with. Someone Ember made when she was merely four, when she needed a friend. She passed the idea of him on to Lucie, and he'd grown into more than an imaginary friend... but a real friend, though you can only speak with him through your dreams. And that's when she heard her math teacher's voice calling from her cabin. Her math teacher? At her cabin? Why... Oh. Dreams, that's why.

"I have to go..." she said, feeling herself being slowly pulled away from the forest.

"Ember! Ember Rose, are you sleeping in my class again?" Mr. Davidson snapped.

"No.. No sir, I apologize..." she said, sitting upright.

"Then answer the question on the board, as I've asked."

Hours later, it was 10:00 at night, and her mother had taken the late shift, leaving Ember to babysit until midnight. She stood in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. She turned around to see Lucie behind her.

"Did he come to you today?" Lucie asked. Ember nodded. "I wonder what it could be this time." Lucie said thoughtfully. "I haven't been dreaming much, really. When I do, he's there. But lately it's just been... Nothing..."

Ember nodded again. "It's been the same for me for ages. Since I was about your age really. Dreams seem to go on and off." Lucie nodded, still looking thoughtful. "Want me to tuck you in?" Ember asked. Lucie nodded again. Ember walked Lucie upstairs and waited for her to get into her pajamas. As she waited, she did the same. When she was finished, she returned to Lucie's bedroom and knocked on the door.

"Luce? You ready?"

"Yep. Come on in." Lucie said. Ember opened the door and Lucie was sitting on her bed, stuffed bear in hand. Ember smiled, remembering when she was Lucie's age, how she loved that same bear just as much as Lucie did now.

"Ready for bed?"

Lucie nodded and paused. "Will you sleep in here tonight Em?" she bit her lip, trying to think of an explanation. But Ember understood. She felt the same way. Not that adventures with Connor had ever been dangerous before. Just as dangerous as dreams could be. But tonight, it felt different. It felt... Real. "Sure." she told her sister.

Lucie laid down in bed and Ember crawled in after her, pulling the blankets up to their chins. She closed her eyes, inaudibly praying she wouldn't sleep. After a while,

Lucie spoke. "Em? You awake?"

"Yeah." Ember responded.

"I can't sleep."

"Me either."

"I've never been so nervous to sleep before. Me and Connor's last meeting was like any other. Nothing bad happened. Why am I so scared about it now?" Lucie said after a pause.

"I don't know, Luce." Ember sighed, trying to figure this out herself. She wasn't willing to let her little sister know she was frightened.

Lucie sighed. "Maybe it's just a feeling. It'll pass, right?"

Ember thought. "Yeah, of course it will." she said. But Lucie could tell she was lying. Lucie nodded anyway, though. Lucie's hand crept to Ember's, and Ember took it and gave it a slight squeeze. They both stayed silent, their thoughts filled with ideas. Ember was the first one to drift into sleep. There she was, in her bedroom. It was dark and empty. She glanced around the room, wondering as she walked to the window, hesitantly. She tugged it open, and a cold breeze hit her in the face. Lucie was beside her now. "To the forest?" the little girl asked. Ember nodded and they gripped each other's hands again. They crawled out of the window and started toward the forest in silence. They reached their tree and hesitantly let go of each other.

"Connor?" Ember called. There was no response. She called again, only to receive the same silence as before. Lucie cocked her head, searching the forest for Connor. Ember looked up into the tree, searching every branch carefully. With no luck, Ember and Lucie looked back at each other.

"Should we check the cottage?" Lucie asked. Ember shook her head.

"The cottage was part of my imagination. Connor doesn't really live in a cottage across the forest. I always wished he did."

"Connor's part of your imagination." Lucie pointed out. "He doesn't really exist, but you always wished he did. And one day, he pulled himself into your dreams."

Ember considered this for a moment. "You sure you're only nine? You're too smart to only be nine."

Lucie smirked proudly, standing straight, and started to walk off towards the middle of the forest, going straight across. She stopped and looked back. "You coming?" Ember chuckled and ran after her. It quickly turned into a race; Lucie was younger with

less balance, but she could squeeze through trees and dart ahead. Ember was older and could keep straight, her long legs good for sprinting. It was a battle of who was faster as the girls tore through bushes and trees, ignoring the scratches. They'd be gone when they awoke. Ember was quite a bit ahead of Lucie, grinning and speeding through the forest.

She had just about reached the area where Connor's cottage should have been, when Ember noticed a sudden drop. She forced herself to stop running, right at the edge. Some of the ground crumbled beneath the weight and she jumped back, peeking slightly over. She was on a cliff. The forest stopped here. Right here.

*Talk about 'edge of the forest'.* Ember thought. She looked up, over the cliff. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. How had she not noticed that before? It was completely blue sky for miles. She should have seen that from quite a bit away. She took a few steps back, until she was about a yard away. The forest kept going and trailed off into a field, where a small house sat in the center. She took two steps forward and it was nothing again. Had it been a mirage...?

Lucie. Lucie didn't know. She turned, and Lucie was running at full speed toward Ember and the cliff. Ember leaped in front of her, because the little girl was going way too fast to stop once she saw the mirage. "LUCIE! STOP!" Lucie stopped a foot away, skidding into Ember and pushing them both off the cliff. Ember screamed as she tried to re-balance, but tumbling over the edge anyway. Lucie was silent, too scared to make a sound as they fell. Ember frantically reached for the edge of cliff again, finally getting hold of the ground, with Lucie clamped tightly around her front.

"Luce... Just climb back up, it's an easy reach." Ember grunted, clinging to the edge. "Hurry, I'm slipping!" Lucie was too scared to let go of Ember as they dangled.

"JUST DO IT." Ember screamed, as one of her fingers slipped from the grassy cliff.

"I'm scared!" Lucie screeched. "What if we both fall?!"

The ground Ember was clinging to started to break off. Ember hurriedly pulled herself and Lucie away, to another area of the cliff, bits of rock and grass falling around them as she moved. "We're not going to fall, just-"

"Luce, grab my hand." said Connor, as he held out his hand. Lucie looked up.

"Connor! Where did you come from?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Grab my hand, you're about to fall again!" he yelled.

Lucie reached away from Ember shakily, taking Connor's hand and letting him pull her up onto the ground. She crawled away from the edge fast.

“Help Ember!” she called frantically.

“I'm working on that.” Connor called back, turning to Ember. He grabbed her arms. “Just climb. We always climb our tree. Just picture that. You're climbing the next branch higher.” he said. Ember nodded, clutching the cliff. She did her best to imagine herself climbing the tree. Her arms were getting tired, her hands slipping. Connor's grip on her arms tightened as he pulled her up. Ember pulled her legs over the side and she was up. She rolled away from the cliff quickly as Connor let go of her. Her arms ached.

They were both catching their breath as Lucie said, “Okay. Maybe I'm not as smart as you said.”

Ember laughed a bit. It was a moment until they remembered the crucial detail. They were dreaming. It was fine. Connor shook his head, sitting down cross-legged in between them.

“Not funny you guys.”

“We're dreaming, Connor. Remember? If we were to have fallen, we would have woken up. Maybe felt a bit shaky, but we would be fine.”

“How are you to know that, though?” he asked. “Maybe if your instincts hadn't said hold on, maybe if you'd just trusted that thought and let yourselves fall, maybe you wouldn't have woken up.”

Lucie thought about this for a minute. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Where would we have gone?”

Connor shrugged. “I don't know. But I'd rather not find out.”

Lucie and Ember exchanged glances, both of them considering what Connor was saying. He sighed. “Bottom line is, be careful.” he said sternly.

“I'll be careful.” Lucie said with a nod. Connor nodded back. Then he grinned, jumping to his feet, which startled both Lucie and Ember in turn, Lucie jumping a foot away from Connor. Connor laughed. “Well, there's no point in sitting around all day, is there? Or should I say night?” He held out one hand to Ember, and one to Lucie. Ember took his hand and stood. Lucie grinned.

“Let's get this adventure on the road!” she said, leaping up enthusiastically. As she jumped to her feet, she took a small, faulty step backwards, placing her left foot on the very edge of the cliff, which broke away almost instantly under the small girl's light

weight. She lost her balance and screamed, short and high-pitched, as she fell from ground.

Ember jumped toward the edge, making an attempt to catch her little sister that failed completely. Connor grabbed her arms, just pulling her back onto the ground before she fell too. “LUCIE!” Ember screamed down the cliff as Connor pulled her back. “LUCE!”

Connor gave Ember a shove far from the cliff, he himself running to the very edge of it and leaning over, searching for the girl. All he could see was fog. “Lucie!” he shouted loudly. There was nothing but his echo in response.

Ember stood and walked to the edge, side-by-side with Connor. “What are we going to do? If what you said is true...”

Connor thought for a minute, then looked at her. “Ember, I need you to do exactly as I say.”

“If it will save Lucie.”

“It will.” Ember nodded, waiting for instructions. “Close your eyes.” He paused, waiting for her to do so. “Now, picture exactly what you think the bottom of the cliff will look like.”

“What if it's bad?” Ember chewed on her bottom lip, picturing a sharp, rocky bottom. Anything could have happened to Lucie down there. Anything.

“Make it better.”

Ember pictured Lucie sitting happily at the bottom. The sharpness had disappeared, there was sun. She didn't know just how Lucie could have survived the drop, but even so, she was there and she was alright. The bottom wasn't frightening anymore. “Alright, I'm ready.”

“Now take my hand.” Ember reached over and felt him take her hand. “Now jump.” he said softly.

“Do what now?” she asked, startled, but with her eyes still closed.

“Jump off the edge. I'll stay with you. Keep that picture of the bottom of the cliff in your mind, the nicer one. Now jump.”

Ember forced the image of Lucie at the bottom into her head, as Connor's words played like a broken tape in her mind. “Maybe if your instincts hadn't said hold on, maybe if you'd just trusted that thought and let yourselves fall, maybe you wouldn't have woken up.” *Maybe you wouldn't have woken up.* Would she wake up? Would Lucie?

These are the things that cut into her mind like a knife as she took a step over the edge, Connor by her side as they fell into the fog of the cliff.

*You're going to die. You're going to die. This isn't right.* Ember thought frantically, squeezing Connor's hand. *Oh my gosh. Make it stop, please make it stop. Wake up, Ember! Wake up!* Ember pushed these thoughts out of her mind and made her image of the bottom as clear as possible. And then they were there.

Ember opened one eye. Yes, they were there. There was sun. There were not sharp rocks, no gloom. The fog overhead looked like clouds. There were trees as well. It was like the forest continued at the bottom of this cliff.

"So it does work..." Connor muttered. "You can control your dreams. Can you control reality, too?" he was studying Ember. She noticed they were no longer holding hands.

"No. I can't." she frowned as she looked around. The cliff was exactly how she pictured it. But Lucie wasn't there. "LUCIE!" she called. "LUCIE JESSICA ROSE."

"Yes?" a small girl peeked out from behind a thick tree trunk.

"LUCIE!" Ember ran and hugged her. Lucie hugged her back, grinning.

"I was afraid you wouldn't find me!"

"You know I'd look for a year if I had to. How did you..?"

"I thought about what everything everyone's told me. And what I've heard on TV, about controlling your dreams. So, I told myself, *You'll reach the bottom. You'll be fine. You'll reach the bottom. You will.* I opened my eyes and.. I had reached the bottom." the girl beamed.

Connor frowned. "This is my fault."

"It's not your fault, Connor. It's no one's fault." Ember said. Though, she felt herself being pulled away. She was waking up. Lucie felt lighter in her arms. She was waking as well.

"It is." he sighed. "Luce, Em, I can't come back. Not to your dreams. I don't want to cause any more trouble. We always get into trouble when I'm here."

"Connor... You know that's not true... Lucie said, but she was fading. She was nearly awake. After a moment, she had completely disappeared. Ember was nearly there.

"Please come back. Please." she begged. "Please!" Connor shook his head.

"I'll miss you two. I love you both." He said. And Ember sat up in bed, next to

Lucie. They looked at each other and hugged, not able to speak.

At school, Ember sighed, pulling her thoughts together. Her cuts and bruises were gone. How? She had dreamed them. They never were real. But the one thing she missed most about her dreamland, the one thing that she knew was never going to return... Connor. She and Lucie had decided to never talk about him again. It was too hard. The brother they always wanted. He was never coming back.

Ember decided that she would take advantage of Connor's absence. She pulled her attention away from thoughts of him, just in time to hear Mr. Davidson say, "Oh, our new student is here." he ran to the door and pulled it open. "Class, meet Sage Williams."

A boy with brown hair, almost equivalent to Ember's in color, entered the room. It formed a perfect sort of wave across his forehead. His green eyes pierced you through easily, but there was softness to them as well. They seemed to be searching the room. And they found what they were looking for. Ember's eyes met his, and she let out a soft gasp. *Connor?* She mouthed. He nodded, a slight hint of a smile crossing his face. "Hello." he said to the class.

"Why don't you take a seat?" Mr. Davidson asked, pointing to a chair behind Ember. The girls in the class stared at him as he moved, taking his seat and pulling out a notebook.

Ember had so many questions. But she knew they'd all be answered in time when a ball of paper landed on her desk as Mr. Davidson returned to the lesson. She unfolded it.

*Meet me in our tree by the forest tonight. I'll explain everything. Bring Lucie.*

Ember turned, looking back at him, and finally being able to tell herself that he was real. He was her friend. He wasn't her imagination anymore. They exchanged a silent smile through their eyes, and she turned back to face the teacher, her smile now very real, and wide across her face.