



ESSENCE

MANDI
LYNN

PROLOGUE

The first thing that the new mother notices about her baby is its silence. She knows something isn't right. It all happened fast, too fast. Unlike the shows she's been watching on TV, the doctors in this hospital don't hand her the child. They speak in quick, quiet words.

"Remove the umbilical cord from the neck."

"It's too tight. Cut it."

"Cole?" the mother asks, pulling her husband to her.

His sight shifts to her, but he only gives her a quiet glance before he looks to their child.

"Honey, is she all right?"

The father nods his head, but she can tell he's just trying to keep her calm.

The silence in the room is frightening. Newborns are supposed to scream out to the world to announce their birth.

The umbilical cord is cut away from the baby's neck. The mother still can't see her child. She leans forward to meet her daughter's eyes. The small infant's skin is blue; the skin around her neck is discolored from the cord's tight grip. Not a sound escapes from the tiny mouth. For a flash of a nightmare, the mother believes her child is dead, a stillborn, but then the baby moves. Her hands and feet feel around her, looking for something. Her mouth is open, seeking air, but nothing comes of the action.

"Cole?" the mother cries, seeing her daughter fighting for life. Her baby, her perfect little baby, was being strangled by the umbilical cord. It's been removed, but why can't she breathe?

"Shh... It's going to be all right, Jess." He hates himself for stating the words he doesn't believe. How long has it been? Seconds, minutes? How long can an infant go without air?

In the mother's mind the only thing she can picture is her tiny baby girl, cold and bloody, unable to breathe. This isn't how the infant should be greeted into the world. It's supposed to be glorious. A moment that neither the mother nor father would ever forget. The only thing certain is that it is a moment they won't forget, but they aren't sure if they want to remember if their daughter doesn't make it.

"Can she breathe?" Jess asks, gripping her husband's hand harsher than necessary.

At the end of the bed, the doctors and nurses mumble among themselves. In their sterile suits they look like aliens, working on the newborn so she can breathe. The parents can only watch as they wonder what is wrong with their child.

"Cole?" Jess's voice turns into a cry. She wants to ask the doctors what is wrong, but she fears, if she breaks their concentration, her baby girl won't make it. After nine long months of trying to keep this baby, the thought of never being able to hold her breaks Jess.

Cole looks over to the baby for a moment and spies an instrument that looks like a turkey baster but much smaller. He doesn't know what it's called, but he knows its use. One of the nurses takes it and uses it to clear the infant's throat.

"They're working on it," he says.

Jess's eyes are frantic, and he can see and feel her fear. Ever-so-slowly the room grows louder as orders are repeated, and a nurse is dismissed to grab something. One doctor stays, working over the newborn.

"Doctor," a nurse says, once she has arrived with a plastic bin that has a soft warm blanket on the bottom, curled around the edges.

Without a word the doctor scoops up the baby and places her into the transport incubator in one quick, fluid motion. The nurse rushes to another table and cleans the baby.

"Mr. and Mrs. Barton." The parents' heads turn away from their baby and to the doctor who now speaks to them. "Your daughter was born with the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around her neck. Although we weren't able to simply slip it off, we were able to cut it off to give her the air supply needed. Even after this was done, she still couldn't breathe, and we think she may have transient tachypnea."

"What is that?" Cole asks. Jess is quiet in her tears as the doctor speaks to them.

"It means she has fluid in her lungs. Recovery usually comes within the first twelve to twenty-four hours, but it can last up to seventy-two hours. There are a few methods of treatment, but we have to determine how much oxygen she has in her blood."

"Is she going to be all right?" Cole asks.

"We can't be sure. She's being admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit."

It's so bright. Even with her eyes closed, the light shines through her thin eyelids. But it's cold. Nothing like that warm enclosed place she's always been. It was weird, being there one moment and then not the next. It was like she was being forced out, no longer wanted. She wanted to fight it for some reason, to keep the warm comforts she'd always known, but she couldn't.

Out here it is cold. At first she only noticed it in her head and then...the strangest thing happened. Something touched her, and it was also warm. Alive and gentle, it coaxed her out of her home. Something went wrong though.

When her body enters this new cold world she wants to scream. Every fiber in her body tells her so. Fear envelopes her. What is this place? She wants to go back, but warm fingers keep poking at her and moving her limbs. Scream; it isn't safe. They'll take you home, if you scream.

But—no—she can't. That's when the panic came. She kicks and squirms, but no sound comes from her. Her arms contact something around her neck. It's a piece of her; she remembers it from home. It isn't supposed to be there, and the warm fingers—the things that took her from her home—keep fussing with it too. It's slippery like the rest of her body, but it hurts her. It pushes in around her neck; the warm piece of her is overtaking her being.

Something is missing from this new world she entered. She doesn't know what it is, but she needs it. Light-headed, her thoughts begin to fade. It's scary, but a breathtaking peace comes over her body at the same time. A bright light comes, but it's not like the one when she left her home. She can't look away from the light. It brings numbness and takes away the pain in her neck, so she follows it.

The slippery thing that was once around her is gone now, but it's not because of the light. The poking warm fingers had removed it. She grows agitated as the hands touch and move her, disturbing her peace—the light fades the slightest bit and so does the numbing, calming sensation. She is being wiped down with something soft. She feels so free with nothing around her neck, but her breathing is fast and rapid.

That's it! That's what's missing from this world. She needs to breathe, but something is still wrong. Inside she feels her heart work overtime to survive. In and out. In and out. It feels off and wrong, like something is blocking her from doing whatever task it is her heart needs so badly.

In the amount of time she's left without air, she can feel something leaving her. The light never disappears all the way, but it doesn't provide its peace. It stays, looking over her. She's torn in two. No longer one entity, part of her leaves to follow the light. She knows this shouldn't happen and fights to stay as one being. She imagines her fingers reaching out, grasping the part of her soul as it floats away to the light, but whether she wills it or not, it goes.

She's tempted to follow it. The light radiates in front of her and begs her to follow. She's drawn to her soul that's left her. The decision is made, and she lets go of this foreign world. She misses the warm, closed-in home she had once known. The fingers pull her away and leave her here where things hurt. She can't breathe; her heart is always at a fast and labored pace. She again reaches out to her soul, leaving this body that grows colder as the seconds pass.

A loud noise is heard around her. A thump of blood passing through her body. As she fades away, its rhythm slows. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

It's so close. The light grows brighter, inviting her. Peace increases around her, and she dreams she can fly; she can do it right now. Wings sprout from her back, taking her to the other half of her soul that has already left.

Thump.

The last heartbeat is loud, shaking her from where she flies in the sky.

"Please, stay with me," a voice cries. It's so familiar; it calls her home. She turns, but darkness surrounds her. All at once the light disappears and, with it, her wings. She doesn't fall but glides safely to the ground, as she is brought back to the world. Unknowingly she has made her decision. By turning to the voice, she let go of the light.

Thump. Thump.

She panics. Her heartbeat grows to a steady pace, and she can breathe again. Her lungs fill with sweet oxygen, and she exhales. But she knows something isn't right. The light is gone, but it took part of her with it. She was never able to grasp the other part of her soul, before the light disappeared.

A piece of her is gone forever.

The NICU is an unfamiliar place to most, but to some parents it has become a second home. They go in and out every day to visit their child who hangs on only by a simple thread. This is why any visitors have to be as sterile as possible, before they can step through the doors. For Cole this is only his first time visiting, but he hopes to not make a habit out of it.

A nurse leads him to a room. Inside are monitors and tubes, and, most of all, a large incubator that holds a baby girl. A document is attached to the side, and it reads Amelia Clarice Barton with all of her information and charts on it.

Inside the baby breathes fast, staggered breaths. Her body has a blue tint to it, but she's alive. Cole stares down at his daughter, completely amazed by her small size. Her lids are closed, but on the paper with her name, it says she has blue eyes.

"May I hold her?" he asks, viewing the IV that is attached to her foot, feeding her oxygen through a vein.

"Not yet. She isn't stable enough, but when she is, you can. You should be able to take her home shortly after that," the nurse tells him. He frowns but is thankful for the periodic beeping that comes from the machine, as it announces her heartbeat.

Jess and Cole take Amelia home a week after her delivery. Her vital signs are normal, and the fluids are cleared from her lungs. No permanent damage seems to have been done in the amount of time she was deprived of oxygen after birth.

Jess cradles her in a snug warm blanket just as the nurse taught her. It's supposed to resemble the feeling of being in the womb and bring comfort to the newborn. It helps, yet Amelia still cries at times. Cole and Jess thank God for that little scream, though, because it means she's alive.

CHAPTER 1

The Forest

Ring around the rosie.

I open my eyes quickly, and the forest surrounds me. Above, high in the trees, a canary displays itself, yellow feathers a bright spot in the otherwise green mass of leaves. His song stops abruptly, eyes wide to some immense fear he's not willing to tell. He's like a statue, listening. With a quick flap of the wings, he's gone. The forest grows eerily quiet—there's no longer a whisper of wind; the birds have stopped their songs—the silence is deafening.

Sitting on a fallen tree, I feel a shift in atmosphere. I tell myself it's nothing—just breathe. My fingers slip to the side and onto a log. Combing through the soft, moist moss, I close my eyes.

A pocket full of posies.

It's all just an overreaction. That's what moving does to you. It's new territory that hasn't yet been explored.

The only sound I can decipher comes from a waterfall, a few feet away from me. I can picture it now, even only having seen it once. The clear blue water starts its descent just inches from my feet, cascading into the pond below. I can hear it.

Ashes, ashes.

There is a sudden moment of realization. The song—I remember what it was about. The Black Plague. I had done a project on it once for school. The child's rhyme was really a song about death.

We all fall down!

A deep chill sweeps through my core but does not choose to leave. I don't falter; in fact I stay in place—not because I want to stay; I can't move. I am somehow bound. My vision blurs—just for a split second—long enough to send chills through my senses, as I lose control of part of my world, but short enough that I don't know whether or not it really happened.

My gaze darts around the forest, but nothing seems wrong. The trees sway; the water flows. I can't move! I will every muscle to fight, to run, to do anything; but I'm left in this forest, clueless as to what's happening. The more I struggle, the more my senses begin to fail me. My arms and torso are covered with a blanket of warmth that grows hot and uncomfortable.

Around me the forest is still, silent, unaware of the sensation that has chosen to overcome my body, keeping me rooted in place. Every muscle inside me is on the defensive, tense for some approaching danger that only the canary is aware of. There's a pressure on my limbs, sending the warmth to tingle in my body as if losing circulation of blood.

Opening my eyes, I see nothing is touching my arms. My fingers linger on the moss, and I concentrate on the feeling.

Panic deepens in my being, feeling the soft growth, hearing the flow of the waterfall. I look around me to see the bright forest I once considered safe—the green pine, the quiet creek, and the textured leaves that beckoned me to the forest in the first place.

There's a vibration in my back pocket, and a few seconds later, my phone begins to chirp out its generic tone. With the new sound my muscles go limp—as if being released from a trance—and I fall off the log and to the ground. On my hands and knees I slide the phone out of my pocket.

My mom.

Emma, get home before dark.

I rise to my feet and run in the direction of my house.

Racing through the trees, I jump over fallen branches and rocks embedded deep into the ground. I had never been scared for my life before, until now. I'd never known what it was like to run for your life. I don't concentrate on my breathing, or where I'm going—I just run.

Adrenaline pulses through me; I jump over fallen trees, rocks, and small streams. I can hear my heart pounding, and each breath I take becomes larger and more labored. For a second I wonder what I'm running from and look behind me. There's nothing, just the trees and plants of the forest.

I stop, catch my breath, but decide to keep going. I trip into a small stream that flows into a waterfall a few feet down. There's an objection of pain, as I drag myself up and out of the two-foot-wide stream. Tired, I struggle to turn myself on my back, looking at the sky as it models a striking blue canvas.

The longer I rest on the moist ground, the more I absorb what just happened. The scene replays itself in my head over and over. The sun hovering above beats down on me, and I cover my eyes. Lifting my right arm, I see my sweatshirt is completely soaked in the dirty water. My side is drenched.

With a sigh I lower my head to the forest floor, and the sun's rays fill and warm me. My body becomes heavy with sleep, and I can feel myself drifting, thoughts becoming less important and images blurring together.

Eventually instinct kicks in, and I sit up, to get back before dark and settle into the warm house. As my muscles cart me off the ground, I'm shocked by the jolt of pain in my side. I press my fingers into my ribs, feeling the throbbing grow more intense. Lying back down, I wait for the pain to go away.

Time passes fast when you're not in step. If you think for a moment that you can get it back, wake up – you can't. Some people think time is theory. Everything is a cycle of events happening over and over. If you think this is true, then be aware and learn from your mistakes.

Wake up!

When I open my eyes again, the sky is a burnt orange. It takes me a moment to locate myself. It's evening; the sun is going down. Despite what happened just hours ago, the forest is bright; there's a quiet rustle in the leaves from a small animal looking for food.

I pick myself off the ground, as my side protests with every move I make. My clothing sticks to my body, as if it's a second skin. Every move I make is greeted with a sharp pain, begging me to stay in place—don't move. The thoughts from hours ago flood my brain, gathering questions that need to be answered. Taking a deep breath, I slide out my phone and text my mom a message.

I'm on my way.

I run home, trying my best to navigate my way around the forest. I start a fast pace through the trees, ignoring the ache in my side.

My pocket vibrates again, and even though I know it must be my mom, I don't break stride. I don't let myself take a break to check it, knowing that, if I stop, I may not be able to start again. Whenever I stop, something comes over me, stalling my progress, keeping me here in the forest. So I press forward, seeing the woods thin out around me, as I approach my house.

With a burst through the final set of trees, I'm out of breath. I stop running and lean onto my knees with my hands, crouching as I feel my heart beat violently from within my ribs. The sky grows dim with the passing seconds, and my breathing slows back to normal. My vision comes to focus on my house. It's a modest home, small in stature but grand in appeal. The chimney is lonely, no smoke billowing from within. The lights inside my house are on, the walls flashing different colors as the TV changes channels, my dad trying to find entertainment after a day of work.

We are the only ones that live within a few miles—and for a good reason. I haven't always lived here. My family used to have a home in Florida where my mom researched animals. When a job offer with more income popped up in New Hampshire, we couldn't turn away. Strings were pulled to get a house built for us on the edge of the White Mountain National Forest. We're all here now, living next to a national park.

"What am I doing here?" I whisper, looking around at the scenery. It's beautiful, really. The top of the mountains are covered with a slight mist, making them appear eerie yet breathtakingly so. I remember how, just this morning, I had seen a moose pass through, while I was eating breakfast. This place is stunning, sharing habitats within nature, but it's not home.

I've lived here for almost a week, and I have yet to feel like this isn't just a long vacation. Part of me still feels as if we will pack up our bags and return back home where the beach welcomes us.

Still bent over, I lean over to run my fingers through the wet grass beneath me, remembering that it was raining yesterday—it rains a lot here. I thought it was just bad luck at first, but then my parents told me about the weather in New England—if it looks like a storm is coming, it is. Their words held true; rain comes and goes so fast here. Wind pushes hair into my face, and I pull back the brown strands. I'm content in my spot. I've caught my breath since all the running, but I'm not ready to move yet.

In my house the TV from the living room continues to light up, shining out the windows. It gives a glow to the otherwise darkening yard. I want to wait to see the stars come out but know I shouldn't let my mom worry. Straightening up, still aware of the fading pain in my side, I brush myself off before heading to the front of the house.

"Emma, you okay?" my mom asks, as I step through the door. Her long brown hair is tied back, like she always has it for work. She's still in her uniform of brown khakis and hiking boots. Right here—in the middle of nature—is where she's most at home. Sleeping under the stars is her haven.

"Yeah, I just got a little lost," I say. My mom scans me over, and I can feel her eyes rest on my sweatshirt. When I look down, half the cotton cloth is covered with mud, turning it from bright blue to a dusty brown. It's no longer soaked like it had been but is still in great need of washing.

"I slipped," I tell her, holding out my sweatshirt as evidence. It isn't a lie; I just wasn't telling her the full truth. The part of me that felt petrified begged to tell my mom what happened—it was as if a force possessed me. Whatever happened wasn't something as simple as falling and blacking out in the forest; it was something more.

She scans me again, not trusting everything I say but dismisses whatever I refuse to speak. "Do you want anything to eat? I left dinner out." She points to the table before turning to the sink to return to the chore of washing dishes.

I look where the food rests: meatballs and pasta still on their serving platter, ready to be eaten. It looks like it had been sitting for a while. I shake my head no.

"I'm actually a little tired. I'll just eat in the morning." I take off my shoes and throw them into the closet.

"You feeling all right?" my mom asks, appraising me for any cuts, scrapes, or other injuries.

"I'm fine," I assure her, watching her face calm. "I just did a lot of walking today." Out of the corner of my eye, I see my dad sitting in his chair watching TV, and listening to our conversation.

"Okay," my mom says, but studies me as I walk upstairs to head for my room.

Once I'm there, I shower, then change into sweatpants and a T-shirt that substitute for pajamas and sit at the bay window. Opening the shades all the way, I let the night shine in. The moon in the sky is only a sliver of light, leaving the stars to illuminate the dim night. After a few minutes of gazing, I find my iPod by the side table and slide into bed. Turning down the volume to a quiet background noise, I drift off.

Has there ever been a night where you didn't feel safe? Maybe you felt you were being watched? Or you couldn't close your eyes for fear of the unknown? If, for only a moment, you let your guard down and hear a sound – unidentified and quiet – maybe it was all in your head.

Never let your guard down.

I awake in the middle of the night. The bay window that lines the wall of my room leers at me. The moon is on the opposite end of the sky, and my family has gone to bed, leaving the house dark. I turn onto my side to have my back to the window, so there is less moonlight on my face. The earbuds of my iPod rest on my pillow. I put them back in my ears and skip through songs, until I find one that can soothe me back to sleep. Closing my eyes again, I drift, the music echoing within.

A soft breeze brushes my face.

I lift my head and turn back to the window and see it closed, just as I had left it. Pausing the music, I take out the earbuds to listen for the wind. I sit propped up with an elbow, leaving me in an uncomfortable position.

Nothing.

Lying down again, earbuds back in place, I turn up the volume of the music, telling myself to fall asleep. Don't think. The music swallows me, stealing my sense of hearing anything in my room.

A few minutes later another breeze pushes against the window, not coming from the outside, but wanting to go there—pushing the curtains even while the windows remain closed. I force myself to turn quickly, wanting to see what is there.

The curtains lick the floor, swaying back and forth ever-so-slightly. Transfixed by the movement, my eyes linger there, until a crash of wood calls more of my attention. My bay window hangs open, air cultivating from somewhere within the room escaping into the dark night.

Jerking away the earbuds, I jump from my bed, fear instilled in me, and my foot gets caught on something on my floor. There's a pulsing behind my ear, as I turn my head to look at my feet. My vision blurs, like it had in the forest, infiltrating the sense of being vulnerable. My sight is only gone for a moment, but it leaves me scattered and confused.

Maybe I hit my head when I fell.

Turning my attention to the bay window, the curtains rest parallel to the wall. The windows are shut, exactly as I had left them.

At that moment my breathing seems too loud. As much as I fight it, my lip quivers. The window had just been open—I was sure of it. Gathering myself in a fetal position, I curl into a ball on the floor. My eyes never close, but every now and then, they linger on the windows.

The digital clock reads 4:18, brightening a small corner of the room. I drag myself from the floor and hide myself within the confines of the bedsheets.

I'm engrossed by the window. I lay down facing the panes of glass, eyes open and music off, leaving me in the piercing silence of night. It seems like hours pass. I stare at the window, unchanging, challenging it to go against the laws of nature—to flash open or have a gust of wind rush through—but nothing ever comes of my watchful eye. I try to keep track of time with the moon, but I look at it so much, it's hard to tell if it has moved across the sky.

It's not until the stars begin to fade with the coming of dawn that I realize just how scared I am. For some reason it is the morning's rays of sun peeking through the bay window that finally allow the tears to stream down my face. The light rests over the seat made under the bay window, as if calling me with open arms to gather myself and cry, but I stay in place. I'm locked within my own world, never daring to leave the comforts of my sheets.

A question is lingering within my consciousness. It's filled with fear and anxiety and cowardice.

What's going on?

Fear instills me. It's fear of the unknown, the type of worry that ripples through your core whenever you're home alone—and suddenly there is a creak in the floorboards as the house settles. You always tell yourself it's nothing out of the ordinary, but it doesn't stop the fact that, for that moment in time, there was fear. This fear now, it's different. Unsettling.

All night I wanted to close the blinds of the window, but I never dared to step forward. Instead I curl in on myself like a coward, blankets forever enveloping me, like they can act as a shield. I'm flashed backward to when I was a kid, afraid the bogeyman will get me if I step foot on the floor during the night. Except this is bigger than the bogeyman.

CHAPTER 2

Unreal

I'm on the beach enjoying the sun. There are a lot of people on the sand just as any other day. The air is hot and muggy, leaving my forehead moist. The pier lines the right side of the beach, extending out over the water where the waves break. I abandon my beach chair and get up to go swimming in the ocean. When I step in the water, it feels ice-cold—not like the usual tropical water of Florida. I go to turn back, but the undertow catches me. Then I go numb. It isn't from the cold water though. This is a different kind of numb. I have no control over my body; I feel limp. Then I hear someone calling me...

"Amelia," says a whispered tone.

I step deeper into the water, following the voice that calls me by my birth name.

"Emma!" says a scared voice, a different voice. It sounds so familiar, although I'm sure I have never heard the voice before. Maybe it just sounded familiar because the voice called me Emma—my mom and dad are the only ones who call me that.

I look around to see where the voice is coming from but find nothing, just the crowded beach full of people. Then I hear the whispering voice again.

"Amelia, come swim with me. I have something to show you."

I step farther into the water, until I'm up to my waist. The water feels so cold; it's like pins against my skin, but I can't stop walking forward. I look to the strangers swimming around me, but none of them even look in my general direction.

"Emma, don't move," screams the familiar voice from a distance. It is different this time, farther away.

I look back at the beach; everyone is gone, and so is the sun. The hot sand lays empty, no longer covered in the weekend beachgoers. There is no colorful sunset—just brightness...then darkness.

The whispering voice suddenly turns into many voices, each one sounding exactly the same, like a haunting echo reverberating off the walls of an asylum.

"Amelia, come join us." The voice sounds excited, happy.

"Yes, come, have fun," says another whisper.

"Come swimming with us, Amelia." The voices grow harsher.

My own will subsides. I follow the voices into the deep blue water, diving under a wave. When I come up for air, I'm not on the beach anymore. I'm in a forest pool. The water bites at my skin, clinging in droplets to my face and body, lingering like a lost ghost. Behind me there is a large rock wall, almost completely covered in a soft green moss. I look up only to see tall trees hanging over my head, blocking most of my view of the sky. Some sort of vague remembrance washes through me, and I'm frozen in place. I'm shocked when I realize the same thing is happening to me now as it had yesterday—this time stronger. The feeling in my core becomes more defined, and what had once been a loss of control grows to an unknown pull, calling me to deeper waters of the natural pool I now stand in.

"Emma, please, don't!" The familiar voice speaks, sounding as if it's crying.

I want so badly to obey the voice, but I can't. I tell myself to walk out of the water, but my limbs don't budge. It's as if I'm no longer in control of my own body. When my vision fades to a blur, my eyes respond, filling with tears that slide down my cheek. I'm brought to another world for a moment, the smell of sterile linen becoming prominent. Bleach and alcohol mix together, stinging my nose and throat. At first I thought that was what brought the ache in my throat, but there is separate pain, like a dark bruise now decorates my neck.

Coughing, tears blur my vision further, and when I blink them away, I'm back in the forest. Water soaks my pants, clinging to my thighs. I shiver in the cold, but the distinct smell of cleaners and the ache in my throat are gone as instantly as they had appeared.

"Amelia, do you see those rocks?" the whispering voice asks.

I look down into the pool and in it is something silver.

"Emma, don't! You have to fight! Don't do it!" The last part is a plea – crying, begging me to stop. This is my mental battle, no one else's, yet this unknown voice knows the struggle I endure.

"Yes, Amelia, pick one up and look into it," the whispering voice coaxes. It grows excited again, as my eyes linger over the rocks in the water. I'm mesmerized by their silver coating that is reflected through the pool. The voice that commands me is off and unnatural. The words are staggered and harsh, losing patience with me. *Look into it.* The words linger in my mind.

I start to walk forward again, the magnetic pull getting harder to fight. My muscles strain, trying to fight the force that controls me, but I still inch forward. I'm standing over the silver rocks, their glimmering surfaces inviting me to pick one up. I slowly start to bend down to choose one – it feels like, if I don't do what this magnetic pull wants, I will be split in half and topple over in pain.

"Emma?" It is a familiar voice again. This time a voice I know – my mom. She sounds scared.

"Emma? Emma, where are you? Honey? Where are you?" She sounds like she's getting farther away. I pull all my attention to her, instantly forgetting the silver stones and looking up to locate my mom.

Again, like in the forest, the thought of my mom is what stops me. But it's too late. My mom's voice is gone. I can't locate myself in the unknown forest.

Dreams are not lands of happiness. It is miscomprehended that bad dreams are nightmares. In truth, the only dreams we have are nightmares. When you are asleep, your brain wanders, bringing up thoughts of hopes and fears. During the night, thoughts of fear are what haunt you. Dreams are nightmares. Hopeful dreams are your wishes that will most likely never come true, which are their own form of nightmares.

The sky is bright when I wake up. I'm on my stomach with my pillow tucked over my head, blocking out any sound. I must have done this in my sleep, because I don't remember moving from the position facing the window. I rearrange myself and see my mom in the hallway, walking with boxes in her hands. I can hear her put them to the side, then she heads back down the stairs for another box.

"Emma?" she asks, peeking into my room when she passes by again. "Could you help me unpack these?"

I step out of bed and onto the hardwood floor of my room. Rubbing my eyes, the blue walls of my room come into focus. I look behind me to the window and see nothing out of the ordinary: curtains still parted open, window closed. I hear my mom coming by my room once more, so I put on a sweatshirt and head to the hallway to help.

"Could you just put away the things in the boxes? It's everything that needs to go in the bathroom, so there isn't much." She smiles at me, hair falling in waves just short of her shoulders. Even though it's still early in the morning, she's up and dressed, ready to take on the day.

The first few days of moving in were spent unpacking my room, so I could get settled, but the rest of the house is still living out of boxes. There have been days that I've just sat at my bay window. Mesmerized by the view, I was sure the thick forest was only an illusion put there to confuse me. The mountains never seeming to change but always holding just the same amount of awe and attention they had the first time I set my gaze on them.

Whenever my mom saw me looking out the window, she would comment, saying how beautiful the view was. I could see it – and I still do – I just don't know how to live here. We are secluded, surrounded by forest on every side.

Struggling to hold a heavy box that needs to be put away, my mom nods her head over to the three boxes on the floor and then keeps walking into her room to drop off another box. The first box I grab is marked Shampoo and Stuff. It's small but heavy. I put the shampoo, conditioner, and other soaps on the side of the tub, and anything else in a cupboard under the sink. The other two boxes are towels, toothbrushes, deodorant, and anything else you will find in a bathroom or linen closet. After finding a place for everything, I head out to the hallway again and see my mom standing at the top of a ladder.

"What are you doing?" I ask, watching her head reappear from a square hole in the ceiling. It's small, not much larger than the boxes my mom seems to shove through the opening.

"We have an attic," my mom says, laughing to herself as she walks back down the ladder.

"Can I see?" I ask, peering up at her.

She steps down and ushers me to go, as I step into the dark storage above us. Every time I lift my foot from the ladder, the wood creaks and shifts. My mom waits at the bottom of the ladder, holding the base steady. As soon as I'm at the top, I look into the dark, empty room. A musky smell greets me, the air filled with dust and loose insulation. "It's so hot," I comment, rolling up my sweatshirt sleeves to my elbows.

Below me, she hovers over a box, trying to organize the contents inside, finding what needs to stay downstairs and what can be put away for storage.

I climb back down to the bottom, the rungs of the ladder shifting under my weight as I descend; my mom holds out another box to put away.

"Put this up there." She points back to the attic and holds onto the ladder for support.

I look at the writing on the side of the box; it reads Baby Stuff. I go back up the ladder, holding the box above me and slide it into the room that's nothing more than unfinished emptiness. "At least there's a lot of storage space up here," I say, heading down again.

"Don't grow too fond of it. The only way to get up there is with this ladder, and I'm hoping it won't be sticking around in the hallway too long." She hands me another box and points to the spare room behind me that we're making into a home office.

I look over the box, reading aloud, "Work Stuff. You realize that almost every box here has the word 'stuff' on it?"

My mom smiles and sends me into the empty office room.

"I'm just saying," I tell her. "This is more than just 'stuff.'"

“You know what I mean,” my mom says, taking her own box and following me into the office. We put things into place, and it slowly becomes more like home. The large grand desk my dad uses now has a computer with a printer not too far off. There’s a small bookshelf with large, thick books filled with words and numbers about my dad’s job that I will never understand. I take a mental picture of the room, realizing, as soon as my dad starts his work again, it will never be this organized.

“Have you finished your room yet?” my mom asks while she arranges books on a shelf. She piles those of the same height together and the smaller ones at another end of a shelf, stacking and assorting them to her liking.

“I don’t know.” I go through a box of papers that are for my dad’s job and give up quickly, not wanting to lose anything important. “I don’t think I will feel at home just by unpacking everything,” I tell her, attempting to read a business chart, but putting it to the side when the numbers and words don’t make sense.

“You just need to get used to things here.”

My mom finishes the books and moves on to organizing the desk, arranging notepads, placing pens in a holder.

We continue to unpack, and eventually I realize I haven’t eaten anything, so my mom dismisses me to go downstairs for breakfast while she continues without me.

“What can I make for ya?” my dad greets me as soon as he sees me step off the stairs. He’s at the stove, already cooking his famous scrambled eggs, and I can smell bagels in the toaster, crisping to a perfect golden-brown. I stand at the entrance to the kitchen, taking in the scents. The stove is filled with pans. But only one has eggs nestled inside and ready to eat. I make my way to the breakfast bar, and when I sit down, I feel the sun on my back. Behind me the dining room opens, an entire wall consisting of windows to fill the house with light. In the center of the windows is a pair of French doors which open up to our small back porch to watch over the mountain range that is our backyard.

“Is any of that with jelly?” I ask, leaning over the counter. My dad smiles at me, his hair sticking out in all directions. He’s not an early riser like my mom.

“Comin’ right up!” He turns back to the stove, and flips and mixes the eggs to cook them evenly. I wait eagerly, seeing the eggs are cooked perfectly, the way I always like them – partially brown, but nowhere near burnt.

I turn myself slightly toward the sun that shines through the large deck window. The aroma of food from behind me smells rich, as I stare out through the window into the woods, the mountains peeking atop the trees. For a moment I feel homesick, missing our beach house, but I smile when my dad puts a plate of food in front of me.

“Ready for your first day of school tomorrow?” he asks, leaning on the chair next to me. I tried to beg my parents to hold off enrolling me in school because the year was almost over, but they insisted.

“Hmm...let me think,” I say, taking a bite of food. “The house is a mess of boxes, and I have no idea what this school is going to be like.”

My dad pulls out the chair to sit next me. He eyes me as I savor his freshly made scrambled eggs. “And I suppose you think these boxes will just magically unpack themselves?” My dad laughs, taking a bite of my bagel and getting up again to cook his own meal at the stove.

“It would be nice,” I say, eyeing the pile of large boxes that sits next to our dining room table.

“Keep dreaming, kid.” He cracks more eggs into the pan and begins to make himself an omelet.

The majority of the day is spent unpacking and cleaning. Even with the three of us, we don’t get everything done that we want. After a while my parents tell me that I can stop, since I have school the next day and need to make sure nothing I need for tomorrow is lost in the world of unpacking.

I find my notebooks, and gather some pens and pencils from around the house. I don’t know what else I will need, so I just put the things I have now in my school bag.

After a long, hot shower I spend the last hour of the day drawing. It’s something I’ve done my entire life. Ever since I was little, I’ve drawn everything from plants and animals to more unexpected things, like raindrops and close-ups of leaves, revealing their true texture to the world. My parents were proud of me and even thought it would turn into something bigger.

They sent me to an art school when I was seven, but the teachers made us draw things the way they wanted. I failed out of the class. My parents were upset, because I was young for the class and only got in because they were friends with the owners. After I failed, the school put an age requirement on enrollment, because young students weren’t talented enough to take the classes. That was eight years ago, and since then I’ve stopped publicly drawing. When the rules were changed because of me, I was humiliated and told my parents I didn’t want to draw anymore. They didn’t believe me at first, but when I stopped showcasing my art, they thought I had stopped altogether.

Now I just keep my work private and hide my drawings as soon as I finish them. It wasn’t until recently I realized why I had failed out of the art class. My drawings have a very abstract quality. I take real-life items and draw them, but when I’m done, they look like a hidden picture within scribbles. My parents have always appreciated the drawings I made, but others have a hard time seeing the picture.

Taking out a blank piece of paper, I then lay down on my bed, using a freshly sharpened pencil to aimlessly doodle. I make strokes across the paper and let my mind wonder. The pencil makes light and dark marks against the page. Sometimes I let my hand rub against it to create smudges that leave black spots from the lead on my wrist.

I continue in the trance, until I feel I’m done. When I look down, I’m amazed by my own work. On the paper is a picture of a water hole, surrounded by a tall rock wall in the back. The water is crystal clear with small rocks reflecting through the liquid. I stare at the drawing, still amazed that I had just drawn it. What shocks me the most is the feeling that I know the place; it feels as if it’s somewhere I’ve been multiple times, yet at the same time, it’s somewhere unknown.

Never assume you are alone, because you never truly are. Only when your life has surely ended and your loved ones have forgotten you is when you are gone. Gone from this world and the next.

Sleep is when you are most vulnerable. It’s a sanctuary and a curse; how you perceive it is up to you.

That night there’s no whisper of the wind to frighten me awake. It’s just me, sleeping, shifting, but never waking. The night passes on in a dreamless slumber. I’m on edge, muscles never relaxing, even when my mind drifts and finds its slumber.

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