

1

Legs hanging over the side of the treehouse, the girl held a match to a white piece of card. The flame licked at its corner, but it wouldn't catch. Why wouldn't it just burn already? This was the only idea she had left. If she couldn't tear it apart, couldn't throw it away, couldn't burn it to ash – what else was there?

Ember blew out the flame and added the match to the pile of burnt sticks beside her. It was useless. She



turned back to the card. *Ember Shadows*. Just the sight of her name typed in black across the top was enough to make her queasy.

She stared out over Everspring. This was usually her favourite place to come for ideas. There was something about the thatched roofs of the village roundhouses, the way they huddled together like bees in a hive, and the way the people snaked between them; she liked to imagine that was how ideas moved in her brain, whizzing around, ready to be found.

It was best to climb up to the treehouse in the morning before anyone was awake, then she could see the sun rise over the treetops on the other side of the village, and people emerge from their houses one by one. But now, after a whole day of trying to get rid of her card, the sun had travelled right across the sky and was almost ready to disappear behind her.

In the orange glow, something caught Ember's eye. From the peak of Mount Never, towering over the village, three all-too-familiar shapes had begun their descent.

Surely there weren't more already? It had only been four days since her own had arrived. But she could

make them out perfectly clearly: three rectangles floating down from the top of the mountain towards the village. They parted as they reached the roofs below, each white card taking a different path, until, one by one, they reached their destinations.

Ember watched one of the cards as it drifted downwards, slowly yet purposefully, until it landed squarely in the middle of a doormat. Ember had seen this sort of delivery enough times to know the cards were never swept away again, no matter how strong the wind. Instead, they would lie motionless, as if held down by some invisible force, waiting to be claimed.

She gave her card another glare and then turned away from the village. Dad had always said, *If you can't fix one problem, find another to work on.* So she stood and began hunting around for something to fix.

Last week, she had been working on the treehouse itself. A huge, four-day downpour had rotted part of the ladder and rusted the special hinges she had designed. Repairing those had been the priority, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to pull the ladder in after her and anyone could have climbed up. Juniper had offered to help, but the treehouse was the one thing

that was truly Ember's. After all, she had built it herself nearly two years ago.

With inventions or inventions-in-progress covering almost every surface of the treehouse – spread across the shelves, the worktable in the centre and even hanging from the tree's branches above her – there was plenty to work on. But as she looked around, Ember couldn't find a problem worth fixing. They all seemed so insignificant since the arrival of her card. Half-heartedly, she picked up the bookrest she had been making for Juniper.

Finding the pieces for this one had involved a late-night salvaging mission to the kitchen. Mum had already asked about the missing cutlery, but she hadn't noticed the bottom hinge on the cupboard under the sink had disappeared yet. Lying about the missing forks and teaspoons had seemed like such a big deal at the time. Now Ember *wished* a missing piece of cutlery was her biggest problem.

Ember examined the half-made bookrest. She had managed to bend two forks into arms to hold the back of the book, and she had attached two teaspoon heads to the corners to keep the pages down. But one side wasn't quite right, not yet. She fiddled with the bolts.

Then she pulled off the teaspoon head. As she worked, an uneasiness began to take hold of her.

It started in her stomach, a feeling like a screw turning in the wrong-sized hole, and then it spread over her body and up her neck. Ember knew that jarring sensation too well; she had felt it before.

It was the feeling of being watched.

Her head snapped up and she frantically scanned the trees around her.

Nothing. Only the branches dancing in the breeze.

She must have been imagining it.

But as Ember peered nervously into the growing darkness, she couldn't stop her gaze from being pulled north, towards the source of all her problems.

Mount Never.

Over the years, Ember had spent hours staring up at that mountain and wondering how the rest of her life would unfold. Villagers always said that fate had big things planned for her, and she had drunk in every word of it, desperate for the day when she would finally know for sure.

Now she hated that mountain. Hated the way it sparkled in the sunset as though it might suddenly

erupt into a kaleidoscope of rays, like light through a diamond. She hated its layers mottled together at the seams, each colour blending into the next. Dark green at the base, turning to orange, then violet, deep red, then gold. At the top, right at the very summit of the mountain, it became a black so dark it seemed as though a curtain of night had been wrapped around the peak. But most of all she hated the long wooden building balancing on the very top. No one believed her of course, but Ember knew she had seen it move in the wind, teetering on the edge as though one day it might fall and slide right down the mountain like one of its stupid cards.

Still, the magic of Mount Never fascinated her. It was captivating, mysterious, the way it delivered everyone their destiny, each one printed on a Fate Card and sent down from its peak. There was no telling when a person's card might come; the council had never managed to figure out the puzzling pattern of their arrival. So far, none had come after a person's twelfth birthday, but there had been some that came so early the child was barely able to read it themselves. Of course, siblings' cards usually arrived close together.

The elders of the village thought this was probably because the fates of family members were so closely intertwined. Ember's stomach clenched at the thought. That meant Juniper's would be any day now.

There had been moments – before her card had arrived – when Ember had been sure it would spell out her every dream and confirm her fate as an inventor. Other days, she was haunted by stories of cards that had come before. There were whispered tales of a girl whose card had come when Ember was a baby. Her fate had been so criminal that the council was forced to send her beyond Border River where she lived off stolen food, broke into homes at night, and spent her days as a nomad, fulfilling her destiny, exactly as the mountain had predicted. The thought would gnaw away at Ember, that maybe her card would deal her something equally as lonely and terrible.

The idea that it would come completely blank had never even wormed its way into her tangle of thoughts.

But here it was.

She had to get rid of it. It had to be done quickly or everyone would find out about her empty fate, and then—

No. She didn't need to think about that. She was going to get rid of her Fate Card tomorrow, she had to.

Windows in the village began to light up like stars as the sun's glow faded, sending Mount Never into darkness.

It was time to go home.

2

Ember could feel the village humming with news as she wove between houses, avoiding the path so she wouldn't run into anyone on the way home. The three Fate Cards she had seen falling from the mountain meant three destinies revealed, and there wasn't a single person in Everspring who wouldn't be talking about them. People would be asking if she had received hers soon enough.

Finally, she reached the red brick of her family roundhouse, nestled among autumn leaves on the edge of the forest, and raced forward.

As soon as Ember opened the front door, the warmth of her home wrapped itself around her and Juniper appeared in the hallway, rushing forward for her own embrace. As usual, Juniper must have been listening for Ember's return, waiting to update her on the latest news.

'Three cards came!' her sister squealed, before Ember had even had time to pull off her coat. 'One of

them was Summer's! She's going to make boats. Isn't that great?'

Ember and Juniper knew Summer from school.

'Didn't she want—'

'To be a baker?' Juniper was the only person who knew Ember well enough to finish her sentences. 'She *thought* she wanted to be a baker, but she was totally wrong and now she's going to be working in the dock with her dad.'

Despite the excitement in Juniper's voice, Ember noticed that her eyes were worried and she was nervously fiddling with the loose strands of hair that had fallen out of her plait.

'What is it?' said Ember. She pulled Juniper towards her and undid the plait fully, then began neatly replaiting it, weaving her sister's blonde hair together into a long braid as she did most mornings.

'Nothing.' Juniper paused. 'Just . . . yours will be here soon, won't it?'

Ember tied off the plait and wrapped her arm around Juniper's shoulder. Together, they looked up at the family's Fate Cards. They had been collected together, framed and hung proudly by the entrance.

Each of the nine cards was unique, the owner's entire destiny crammed into a space no bigger than Ember's shoe. Words had been typed tightly together to squeeze in as much detail as possible – some horizontal, some vertical, but every inch filled with facts about the life they would lead, where they would live, who they would marry, what they would be. Aunt Genevieve had been fated a life so full, the ink had even carried over to the back of the card. And of course, in the middle of each card, there was always the number, showing how many years they would live.

‘What was Summer's number?’ Ember asked.

‘Seventy-eight,’ said Juniper. ‘That seems like a good age to die, right?’

Ember nodded. It was a strange question. *No* age was a good age to die. But given that some of the cards came down from the mountain with a number that didn't even reach adulthood, seventy-eight seemed like a very good age to go.

Between the cards, their great-grandfather had painted a tree, so that each Fate Card looked as though it hung from a branch, their fates intertwined together as

generations passed. Every spot on the tree had been taken except for three, where blank spaces lay waiting; one for Juniper, one for Ember, and one where their father's missing card should have been.

‘Only ours left now,’ said Juniper, her usual sing-song voice low and faint.

‘It will be all right,’ said Ember, and squeezed her shoulder. ‘Your card is going to be great. You’ve got nothing to worry about.’

But Juniper simply nodded, still staring at the frame. ‘I wish it was here already. Or yours was. It’s horrible waiting all the time, not knowing anything.’

Ember loved her little sister more than anyone else in the world, but she couldn’t tell her about the blank card. She just couldn’t. Juniper was worried enough about her own card; telling her would only make things worse. Thankfully, like everyone else, it seemed she didn’t suspect a thing. No one knew the card had arrived already.

Ember swallowed down the truth and plastered a smile on her face.

‘Look, I know it’s hard waiting, but you’re right. Mine will be here before my birthday next week, and

then yours will come. Or maybe it will even beat mine here, and you'll be the winner.'

Juniper's head whizzed round, her competitive streak switched on. 'What do I win?'

'Well, how about you can have four books from my bookshelf?'

Juniper's eyes widened and she nodded slowly, as if weighing up the offer. 'Any four? Even the ones on the top shelf? Your favourites?'

'Any.' Ember crouched down, putting a hand under Juniper's chin. 'And you know, we can work it out together, whatever your card says. Even if it says you're going to be the toilet cleaner for the village, or a brown leaf collector, or a hermit who lives in a hole underground.'

Juniper let out a giggle and grabbed Ember's hand, squeezing her fingers until they hurt. 'You're right. And I can't wait to see what your card says. Your destiny is going to be amazing, I know it is. I think you'll be a Council Leader.'

Ember could almost feel the empty card in her bag screaming to get out, to jump inside the frame and reveal that, actually, fate had absolutely nothing in store for her whatsoever.

‘What’s Mum making for tea?’ asked Ember, trying to change the subject. But Juniper just shrugged, her plait bouncing around her shoulders as she faced the frame once again, this time with a stern gaze, as if willing her card to arrive first.

They didn’t look like sisters, not really. Ember was tall for her age and Juniper was tiny, even for an eight-year-old. There was no trace in Juniper’s hair of the auburn colour that burnt Ember’s own. Juniper had baby blue eyes with flecks of grey and light skin, while Ember’s eyes were green, her skin browner. Only the matching freckles across the noses gave them away. Maybe that was why Ember liked them so much.

‘Want a surprise?’ said Ember. ‘I’m working on an invention for you.’ She reached round to her backpack to pull out the bookrest. ‘I think you’ll like it. It’s going to be called the Book Cutler, like cuddler and cutlery all mixed together. When you’re reading—’

‘I wish I knew what Dad’s card had said.’ It was the smallest whisper, but it halted Ember’s train of thought, the way it did whenever Juniper brought him up.

Ember opened her mouth, but what was there to say? They both knew what had happened to their father. No one knew why his card had disappeared, but there was nothing Ember could do to change what had happened, no matter how much she wished otherwise.

‘Actually I think your present is in my room,’ she said, shouldering her backpack again and pretending she hadn’t heard Juniper’s words. ‘I’ll give it to you later.’ Leaving Juniper, she followed the corridor round the house to her bedroom.

The village roundhouses had been designed by her grandmother long ago, and to Ember they were the most ingenious design. Each one was a perfect circle, complete with a ring around the edge making a hallway to access all the rooms. The inner circle was split in half. One of the halves was split again to hold the kitchen and living room, where she and Juniper read together on rainy days, and the other half held three small bedrooms and a bathroom. Everything about its layout felt safe, as though nothing could hurt their family when it was inside that circle, the hallway a protective embrace around their home, keeping them together.

Ember's room was as disorganised as her treehouse, which was exactly how she liked it. Above the bed frame, which was carved to fit the curved wall, she had hung shelves to store piles of inventions, some finished, some still in progress, some no more than ideas that hadn't made it to the treehouse yet.

Then there were the lights. That was the one problem with the shape of their home: having the hallway on the outside meant the only light came from



small panes of glass built into the roof. To brighten things up, Ember had collected light bulbs to hang from the walls and ceiling, and, when they were all turned on, each one hung like a firefly over her head.

Flicking them on now, Ember closed the door behind her and sank on to her bed, trying to shake the guilt she felt whenever Juniper brought up their father. She had enough to think about at the moment.

She opened her bag and, slowly, as if it were made of something toxic, Ember pulled out her card.

The white space glared back at her and she slid it under the pillow, heart thumping.

No one's card had ever come empty before. Never. No matter how bad their fate was, they had always been given *something*. She had wasted the whole day thinking up ideas to get rid of it that hadn't worked and now there were only four days until her twelfth birthday. Cards always arrived before then. If she kept it a secret much longer, people would start to become suspicious.

Soon, she might have to come clean.

Soon, but not yet.

'Are you all right in here?'

She sat bolt upright, spinning round to look at the door where Mum stood, leaning against the frame.

‘Sorry, you scared me. Didn’t hear you.’ A tiny corner of the card was still poking out from under her pillow. Her skin prickled.

Mum walked over to the bed, ducking below a particularly low bulb, and sat down, pulling Ember’s feet on to her lap. ‘No Fate Card again today?’

Ember shook her head and shuffled up the bed towards the pillow to cover the card, before meeting her mum’s gaze. Her mum had always been beautiful, with long, chocolate brown hair that curled over her shoulders and perfectly framed her angular face and dark eyes. There were definitely traces of Juniper in her smile and the way she looked when she was thinking something through, but there wasn’t much of Ember that she could see reflected in her mum.

‘You’ll get it soon. And you know, whatever is on that card, we love you regardless. Dad did too.’

Since Dad had died, it was much harder to predict her mum’s mood. Some days she was the strongest, most independent woman. Other days she was impossible to talk to, as fragile as a daisy in a thunderstorm.

Thankfully, today seemed like one of the better days.

‘You know,’ Mum continued, ‘Juniper told me she thinks you’ll be a Council Leader. Imagine that, my Ember leading the village!’

‘She said that to me, too,’ said Ember. ‘But, you know, I might not be anything important. I might have—’ She tried words out in her mind but couldn’t find anything that fit. *Nothing? An empty future?* How could she know what the blank card meant?

‘Every job is something, Ember. Everyone has value.’

‘I know. It has to be something good though, because otherwise Dad died and it was all—’

‘No,’ Mum said, grabbing Ember’s hand. ‘What happened to Dad doesn’t have anything to do with what’s on your card. You don’t owe him, or the rest of the family, anything.’

Mum wouldn’t say that if she saw what was under my pillow, Ember thought.

‘Sometimes what’s on the card surprises us. But that doesn’t mean it’s not right.’ Mum tucked her hair behind her left ear, and a dandelion earring that Ember had made her sparkled under all the lights. ‘It’s not always easy to accept our fate, but it’s our

duty. Think about all of the jobs in the village. Everyone plays their part and, together, we're a community.'

The idea hung between them for a moment. Every person was a cog in the community's mechanics. Without a purpose, Ember would be nothing more than a spare part.

'Only your father knew this,' her mum went on, 'but before my card arrived, I wanted to be a writer. I had written nearly an entire book when I was little, an adventure story . . . but once I found out that books weren't on my card, I put it to one side.'

'How did you just . . . stop?'

'It was my fate, Ember,' her mum said simply.

'But Mum, what if someone didn't follow their card? What if—'

'Impossible. Fate is fate. It will always right itself. You might think you're choosing another path, but it will always lead back to your fate. You *know* that.'

'But what about Dad's card? What happened to it? And did it say that—'

'Ember!' her mum said sharply, cutting her off. She closed her eyes for a second and Ember watched her

shoulders rise and fall as she calmed herself. ‘Enough,’ she said at last. ‘What happened, has happened. The card has gone and we will never know for sure what it said. Anything I *think* it might have said . . . well, it’s only a foggy, obscured memory.’

Mum stood up and pulled the drawer of the bedside table open to retrieve Ember’s most prized possession. It was a collection of old tools kept in a silver case, tarnished at the corners, with a brown leather handle. Etched into the silver was a single line of script in her father’s handwriting, which read, *Your only limit is your imagination.*

‘Now, why don’t you make me something exciting before we eat?’ she said, smiling down at Ember. ‘I need you to fix the kitchen cupboard door too, one of the hinges seems to have walked off.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘Know anything about that?’

Ember managed to return a smile and sat up, taking the case from her mum. But once the door had closed, she pushed it straight back into the drawer. She didn’t have time to make anything new. She had less than four days to figure out what to do about her empty Fate Card, before the whole village became suspicious.

Because if they found out she had no future, no destiny, and no part to play in the community . . .

Ember shuddered to think what might happen then.