

Chapter 1



The thing about magic is that it's terribly clever and the thing about grown-ups is that they very often aren't. Or at least not in the way that matters. Discovering magic, you see, is about noticing it's there in the first place. And most grown-ups are way too busy to spend time watching and wondering and sniffing out secrets.

Children, on the other hand, never miss a thing. But even the most curious child can take a while to sniff out magic. Because magic knows where to hide. And it's not in faraway lands or long-lost kingdoms. It's right here. Under our noses. In our forests and rivers. In our oceans and caves. In the villages around us where nothing interesting or exciting ever seems to happen. These are

the places where everything happens, where magic lurks and adventures start . . .

And so it was with the sleepy village of Yawn. Perched above the cliffs on the east coast of Scotland, Yawn was a huddle of unmemorable cottages lining a single, unmemorable street. Even geographers forgot to include it on their maps. There was a small school, a garage and a post office. And beyond the village, lay the sea. Known to the locals as the Swirling Soup, it was too wild to steer a boat across and too cold for tourists to bother visiting.

And yet, there was magic here. Had you been looking out to sea at midnight, you might have glimpsed the tip of a large, domed head as a kraken surfaced for the briefest of moments to feel the night on its skin. Had you the nerve to climb down the steepest cliff, you might have stumbled across the phoenix nesting there. Had you been able to part the clouds on the gloomiest day in Yawn, you might have noticed a flash of dragon wings tearing across the sky.

All of this ten-year-old Ember Spark had, so far, missed. She had lived in Yawn for as long as she could remember and nothing interesting or exciting ever seemed to happen there. Yawn was a disappointment on

an epic scale. The most unlikely place for an adventure. And Ember was convinced of this fact – right up until the moment she accidentally found herself rescuing a magical beast.

It all began on a cloudy Sunday afternoon when Ember was perched on a rock on the beach beyond Yawn. She sat on this rock by the shore most weekends, skimming stones into the sea and chucking pebbles at the other rocks jutting out of the water ahead while she waited for something exciting to happen. It never did. Even though last summer Ember’s teacher, Mrs Rickety-Knees, had led her to believe that it might.

‘Adventures are a bit like hiccups,’ she had said when Ember was sitting on a swing in the playground, looking bored. ‘They can happen to anyone at any time . . .’

After that, Ember had thought it best to be prepared so she took to sleeping with a pair of wellington boots under her pillow. It was an uncomfortable arrangement but an important one. Because Ember wanted to be ready



for the adventure and if it came along at midnight, and there was a howling gale outside, she didn't want to find herself fumbling around in the dark looking for decent footwear. She wanted to pull on her wellies and dash off into the night right there and then.

The problem was, the adventure seemed to be running late. Very late. In fact, Ember was beginning to wonder whether it was going to bother turning up at all.

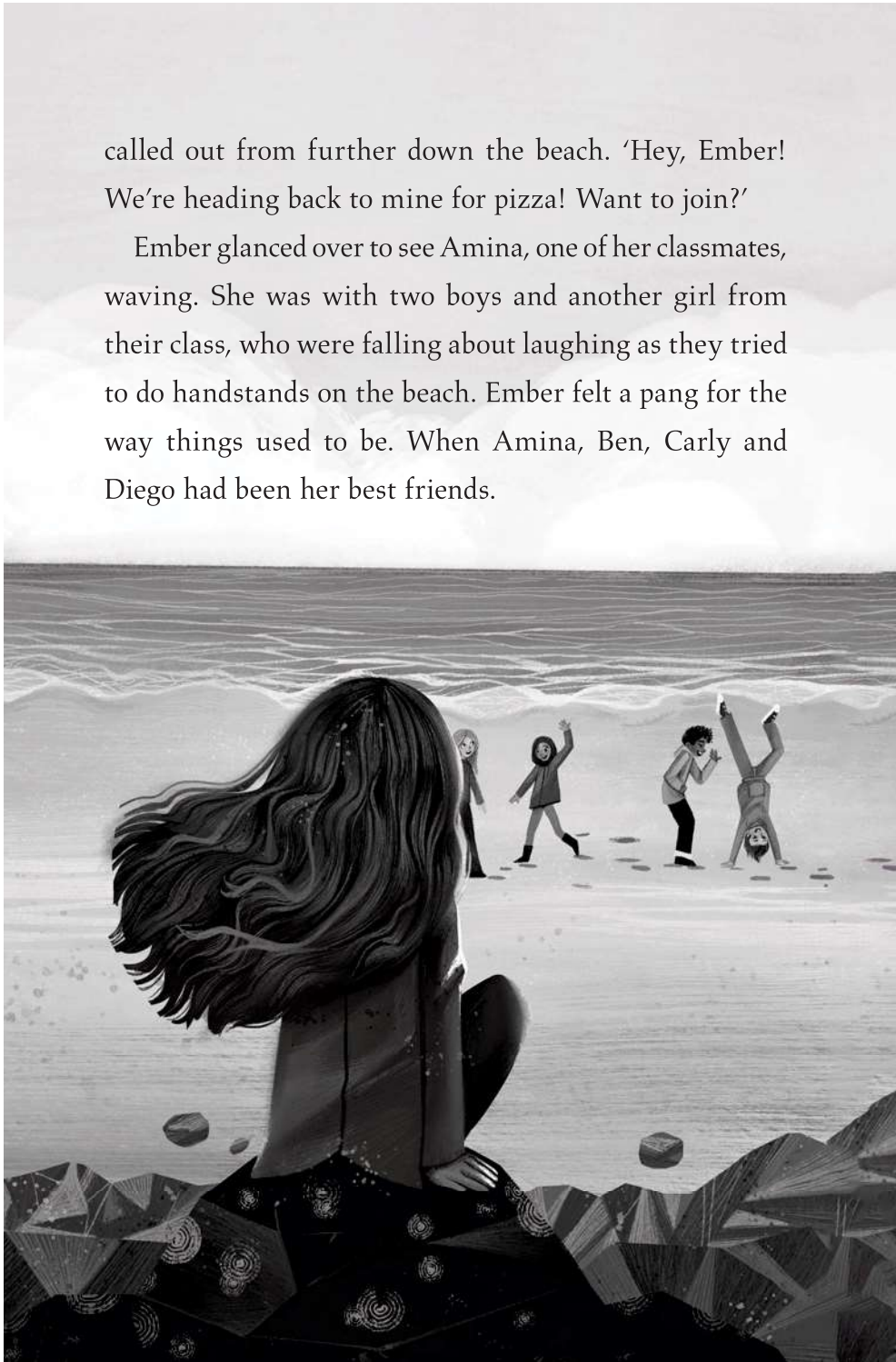
It was March now and the Swirling Soup was grey, like concrete, pinched into waves by a gathering wind. Ember shivered as she skimmed a stone across the water. The ocean looked freezing – the kind of water you'd avoid swimming in at all costs. Unless you were Gutsy Wonder, Ember reflected, and a sea monster happened to rise up out of the waves and everyone was relying on you to get rid of it.

Gutsy was the heroine of Ember's favourite comic: *The Amazing Adventures of Gutsy Wonder*. She was an ordinary girl by day but a superhero by night. And Ember was obsessed with her because she could fly and turn invisible and she spent her days saving the world from aliens, monsters and badly behaved grown-ups.

Ember snapped out of her thoughts when a girl's voice

called out from further down the beach. 'Hey, Ember! We're heading back to mine for pizza! Want to join?'

Ember glanced over to see Amina, one of her classmates, waving. She was with two boys and another girl from their class, who were falling about laughing as they tried to do handstands on the beach. Ember felt a pang for the way things used to be. When Amina, Ben, Carly and Diego had been her best friends.



Up until last year, they'd done everything together: explored caves on the beach, biked along the clifftops, had sleepovers at each other's houses and scooted through Yawn singing their favourite songs at the top of their voices. The Alphabets, they'd called themselves, because the first letters of their names spelt out the start of the alphabet. And though they hadn't tackled any proper adventures – because such things didn't exist in Yawn – they'd had a lot of fun.

But then Ember's dad had walked out last year – and everything had changed.

'I've got to help my mum in the garage!' Ember called back, even though her mum didn't work in the garage at weekends.

'Maybe next time, then!' Amina shouted.

Ember gave a thumbs up but she knew it wouldn't happen. She'd done a lot of thinking since her dad walked out and the heartbreak she'd felt at his leaving had led her to the miserable conclusion that there was no point having friends in case they upped and left too. Then she'd have to go through the agony of being abandoned by people she loved all over again. And she was not up for that. So she'd stopped hanging out with the Alphabets as

a safety measure – which meant life in Yawn was even duller than it had been.

Amina and the others hurried away over the sand dunes until it was just Ember and a lone fisherman left on the beach. At least Ember assumed he was a fisherman because he was dressed in waterproof overalls and a wide-brimmed waterproof hat – and he was pacing the shoreline with a net in his hand. Yet Ember couldn't remember ever actually seeing a fisherman try to catch something in the Swirling Soup. The locals kept their boats in the harbour a little further down the coast where the sea was calmer and it was easier to fish.

Ember watched the man for a while longer as he paced up and down the length of the beach, his eyes fixed on the water. Then it began to drizzle and Ember looked up at the darkening clouds with a sigh. More rain was on the way and though Ember was allowed to wander down to the beach on her own, her mum had made it very clear that she was to be back for mealtimes and certainly before any bad weather came in.

Ember slid off her rock and was just about to turn away from the Swirling Soup when something caught

her eye. Something small and white clinging to the side of the largest rock jutting out of the sea a stone's throw in front of her. At first Ember thought the small, white something was just a scrap of rubbish stuck in a crack in the rock. But when she squinted through the drizzle, she was less sure. Rubbish wasn't usually furry. Nor did it cling to things with four trembling feet.

Ember blinked. Was that an animal stranded on the rock? If the tide had been out, she'd have been able to leap from rock to rock towards the largest of them, where the animal was clinging. But the tide was creeping in and the smaller rocks had already been swallowed by the Swirling Soup.

Ember waded out into the sea as far as she dared – until the water was lapping at the top of her wellies. She squinted again. And this time, a white, furry head swivelled round from the rock to face her. It had two shining black eyes, a twitching pink nose and whiskers.

Ember frowned. 'A *hamster!* On a rock out at sea?!'

She racked her brain. There hadn't been any posters in the village saying that somebody had lost a pet. And as far as she knew, hamsters didn't roam the wilds of Scotland. Yet here one was, scabbling to keep a hold of a rock as

the tide rose all around it – and growing increasingly soggy in the rain.

Ember's skin tingled. Was today the day? Was finding this stranded hamster the start of her long-awaited adventure? Ember was so thrilled at the prospect that she didn't notice the fisherman had stopped pacing halfway down the beach and was now staring at the rock where the hamster clung.

Ember eyed the Swirling Soup purposefully, just as she imagined Gutsy Wonder would do at the beginning of a mission. It still looked freezing. But now there was the question of the hamster. It needed help. Because although Ember had read somewhere that some hamsters could swim, she doubted any rodent would survive the Swirling Soup. Currents came out of nowhere and winds stirred up mighty waves so it would be curtains for the hamster in a matter of minutes. And Ember loved animals, so she couldn't have that.

Just last week she'd rescued a mouse trapped in the garage and the week before that she'd nursed a butterfly with a broken wing. She had a way with animals that even her school reports picked up on: *'Not much progress in the classroom but another fantastic year looking after*

the school guinea pigs. They refuse to accept food from anyone other than Ember, and even Chomp, the guinea pig everyone assumed had no interest in anything other than lettuce and murder (teddies, not children), trots over to Ember when she approaches and grows calm and content in her arms. Ember has an unusual gift with animals.'

Now Ember stood with the sea clawing at her boots. The Swirling Soup had come with a warning from her mum – *never enter it alone* – so she found herself looking about for the fisherman she'd seen earlier. Perhaps they could wade into the water together and use the net to rescue the hamster? When she turned to look for him, though, she realized the fisherman was no longer pacing the shoreline. He was already wading into the sea, further down the beach, but unmistakably in the direction of the hamster. As if that was what he'd been looking for all along. Not a fish but a rodent.

'Looks like a hamster stranded on a rock!' Ember called to him. 'Do you need my help rescuing it?'

The fisherman didn't reply. He didn't even look over at Ember. And that struck her as slightly odd because he was only twenty metres away from her. He was definitely within earshot. Ember took a tiny step forward and a

splash of ice-cold water sloshed into her boot. She knew a fisherman with a net had a better chance of rescuing the hamster than she did but something about the way this fisherman moved – with his head low and concealed beneath his hat, ignoring Ember entirely – made her feel uneasy.

She took another step into the Swirling Soup and the water surged inside both her boots. Ember shivered but she didn't stop. Even though she could see the waves building out at sea.

Then, suddenly, the fisherman cried out as a wave smashed down over him, knocking him off his feet and dragging him beneath the surface, back the way he had come. He emerged, water dripping from his chin, and before he pulled his hat down over his face again, Ember glimpsed a long, crooked nose and two eyes as cold and grey as unpolished armour. And even a peek at these eyes was enough for Ember to realise something very important: she needed to reach the hamster before he did.

'I'm coming!' Ember yelled to the rodent.

The fisherman was up on his feet again, wading through the water, and now that she looked more closely, Ember could see that his net was different from those

the local fishermen used. Theirs had weathered handles and frayed mesh but the handle of this one was black, and polished, and the mesh glittered silver like a large, sparkling cobweb.

Ember shoved the thought aside because she was actually closer to the hamster than the fisherman now – only a few metres away. The water was up around her waist, the cold chiselling away at her bones, and she could feel the current stirring into life beneath her. But she kept going, without taking her eyes off the hamster as it edged higher and higher up the rock to escape the rising tide, except to glance over her shoulder at the fisherman. The current was swirling around him too, shunting him this way and that, but he was slowly closing in on the rock.

‘Hang on, little hamster!’ Ember cried, chest deep in the water now, and shivering. ‘I’m almost there!’

She reached out a hand to grab the rodent but without warning the current knocked Ember from her feet and sent her crashing beneath the waves. She struggled up, choking and spluttering, but the current only pulled harder and she was tossed back under the waves again. Her wellies came loose and were lost to the swell but

eventually Ember managed to push herself up for air. Every time she lurched forward to try and scoop the rodent up, though, the current flung her back, forcing her further and further out to sea until she could no longer feel the sand beneath her feet.

The fisherman, far bigger and stronger than Ember, kept wading until he was within striking distance of the hamster. He raised his net and Ember's heart skittered. Then, just as he was about to swipe, a wave crashed over the top of the rock the hamster clung to. Ember shrieked, fearing all was lost. Either the hamster would drown or the fisherman would snatch it, surely? Except neither of those things happened. Because the hamster did something remarkable.

It leapt up into the air: and this was no rodent-sized hop. It was a huge, soaring leap which saw the hamster clear the wave and whizz through the rain towards Ember, like some kind of miniature flying superhero. It landed with a wet plop on her shoulder.



Ember stared at the rodent, too stunned to speak. The leap had been enormous – at least ten metres. There was no way a rodent could jump that far! But the fisherman hadn't looked surprised. Perhaps he already knew that this was no ordinary hamster. Whatever the reason, he was no longer staring at the rodent. His cold, grey eyes locked on Ember – just for a second – then he pulled his hat down lower so that it covered his face.

Ember glanced at the shore. She could feel the current building. If she didn't start swimming now, there'd be no going home. But the fisherman was blocking the way. Then an enormous wave smashed over her, dragging Ember underwater and spinning her upside down. She scrabbled to the surface, gasping for air and feeling for the hamster. Miraculously, it was still clinging to her shoulder. And to her relief, the fisherman was no longer standing in her way. He was wading back towards the shore – fast, as if in a hurry – and when he reached it, he hastened into the sand dunes and disappeared.

Ember didn't have time to piece things together. 'I'm going to swim for the shore,' she panted to the hamster, 'so hold on tight!'

But Ember was going nowhere fast. Her clothes were

heavy, her limbs were frozen and the waves were growing too big to handle. Panic rose inside her as the Swirling Soup sucked her backwards once again. The adventure she'd been waiting for was now spiralling out of control . . .

'Help!' she whimpered. 'Help!'

The waves were too big for Ember to see if anybody else had ventured down to the beach but a reply came to her – if a voice whispering inside you could really be called a reply.

Forty Winks, the voice inside Ember whispered. *Forty Winks. Forty Winks. Forty Winks.*

And Ember knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was the name of the hamster clinging to her shoulder. She did not know how she knew this. She just did. And for some strange reason, knowing the name of the rodent who had trusted her enough to leap through the air and land on her shoulder, gave her a fresh burst of energy to try for the shore one more time.

On and on Ember swam, battling against the current and the waves until finally, she was aware of the sand beneath her. She could vaguely hear a noise beyond the waves and the rain – somebody shouting in the distance – but she was so exhausted and cold that when she staggered

ashore, she collapsed in a heap. And she would've lain there for a good while longer, getting colder and colder and wetter and wetter, had Forty Winks not started chewing on her ear.