

CECILIA GALANTE

The
World
from
Up
Here



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Chapter 1

Mondays are hard.

Mondays at school are even worse. But kicking off the first ten minutes of a Monday at school with a fire drill is my definition of insanity.

I'd barely gotten settled at my desk when the fire alarm went off, blaring so suddenly from the speakers in the room that I almost fell out of my seat. You'd think I'd be used to the sound, since we have at least three drills every year. But no. That shrill, ear-splitting noise shoots through me every time and leaves me trembling all over.

"All right, boys and girls!" Mrs. Danforth, my sixth-grade science teacher, clapped her hands together as we rose from our chairs. "You know the drill! Everyone in single file!" This was the first time I'd been in science class when the drill sounded, and while I was unsure where we needed to go when we got outside, I also knew I wouldn't have any trouble finding out. At Sudbury Middle School, Mrs. Danforth was known for two things: her love of all things green and her megaphone-mouth. "We will be heading for the side door," she hollered now,

“and then lining up outside on the south side of the building! Everyone hear me? The *south* side of the building! All right, let’s go now! No talking, please!”

My heart, which had begun to slow down a little, sped back up again as I got in line behind Charlotte Reinert, who was braiding her waist-long hair. I leaned forward as we traipsed down the stairs. “The south side?” I whispered. “Isn’t that where . . . I mean, can’t you see . . .”

“Wren Baker!” Mrs. Danforth’s voice tipped toward the dangerously annoyed–sounding zone. “What did I just say about talking?”

I pressed my lips together as Charlotte pushed the door open ahead of me and tried to concentrate on the backs of her blue sneakers, which were worn and scuffed. It wasn’t even nine o’clock yet, and the chill in the autumn air made me shiver. The sun hung low in the sky, and I could smell wood smoke somewhere in the distance. “This way!” Mrs. Danforth shouted. “Right over here by the chain link fence, everyone!” I pulled the sleeves of my sweater over my hands and tried not to look up.

“All right, boys and girls, let me take roll and then you may talk quietly until it’s time to go back in!” said Mrs. Danforth. “When I call your name, please say ‘here!’ Janie Answel?”

Even with my eyes on the ground, it was impossible not to feel the enormity of Creeper Mountain looming in front of us like a gigantic ship. People who didn’t know better might have thought the mountain was beautiful,

with its thousands of trees, each one splotted with the colors of fall: pomegranate red, brilliant orange, warm yellow. But I knew better.

“Wren Baker?”

“Here.” My voice was barely a whisper.

“Carmela Callahan?”

“Here!”

“Everyone look up at the mountain!” I squeezed my eyes tight as Jeremy Winters hissed to the rest of us. “Holler if you see anything witch-related!”

Charlotte’s now neatly braided head swiveled in Jeremy’s direction. “My dad saw the raven last week!” she whispered. “He was on his way home from work, and all of a sudden he saw this big shadow above him. When he looked up, he saw a flash of red, and then it disappeared.”

“She sends it out at dusk.” Jeremy nodded. “It guards the whole mountain—” He stopped abruptly and pointed. “There! You see it? Right at the top! A tiny thread of smoke!”

“Where?” Carmela Callahan pulled a finger out of her ear. “I don’t see . . .” She gasped. “Oh, there it is! I see it!”

A flash of heat spread through the center of my chest as the excitement began to build among the rest of the students. I took a few steps back, hoping I didn’t seem too obvious, and willed myself not to listen. Next to us, another line of students was forming. Silver Jones stood in the middle of the line, her blonde hair shimmering like

gold strands in the morning light. She and I were first cousins, but I'd never actually met her before she and her mom showed up in Sudbury. In fact, until she moved here from Florida a few months ago, I wasn't even sure how old she was. Now, all the boys strained in her direction, clamoring for a glimpse of her. Even Jeremy, who was in my line, leaned forward as she came into view. "Hey, Silver!"

Silver looked up at the sound of her name. Her eyes were pale green and set inside a face that was so pretty it made my teeth hurt. *Someday, I thought, if I get very lucky, and all the stars align themselves just right, I might end up looking a little bit like her.*

"You know about Creeper Mountain, don'tcha?" Jeremy seemed giddy to have Silver looking at him. "Witch Weatherly and all that?"

Silver's eyebrows narrowed. "Witch who?"

Jeremy pointed. "You see that smoke coming out of the top of the mountain?"

Nathan Billings and Dylan Fisk, who were standing on either side of Silver in line, seemed to explode simultaneously. "Holy cow, there it is! There she is!"

"There who is?" Silver tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear and pulled out a tube of coconut lip-gloss from her back pocket. "What are you guys talking about?"

"No one's told you about Witch Weatherly?" Dylan's brown hair looked like it had been cut with a pair of Popsicle sticks; shaggy wisps stuck out all over his head.

“She lives right up there on that mountain. Look! You can see the smoke coming out of her chimney.”

I reached up slowly and pressed in the little nub of cartilage on my left ear as hard as I could. I would look like an idiot if I stood there with both hands over my ears, but I knew what was coming, and I didn’t want any part of it. Even one blocked eardrum would help a little.

Silver squinted at the mountain as she rolled the gloss over her lips. “I think I see it,” she said. “Kind of on the left?”

“Yeah!” The excitement in Dylan’s face seemed to fade as he looked around the group. “Man, I wonder what she’s burning up there,” he said.

“Or cooking,” Nathan said ominously.

“Anyone hear of any missing people lately?” Jeremy asked.

“Or pets?” Charlotte chimed in next to me.

The single eardrum block was not working. I started to hum “My Country Tis of Thee,” softly at first, then louder as the conversation continued.

“Missing people?” Silver capped her lip-gloss and slid it back inside her back pocket. Her lips glistened like the inside of a peach.

“Oh man.” Jeremy shook his head. “We gotta tell you the whole story. It goes way back. Like all the—” He stopped suddenly. “What’s that noise?” All eyes turned toward me as he took a step in my direction. “Wren, are you humming?”

“She’s blocking her ears, too!” Dylan hooted. “She doesn’t want to hear about the witch!” He shook his head. “Geez, Wren, how can you be twelve years old and still act like such a baby?”

“I’m not.” I lowered my finger as my face flushed hot. “I was just humming a song I heard on the radio this morning. Go ahead, tell her the story.”

The kids in both lines seemed to come alive all at the same time. The flurry of competing voices bubbled and swelled—words like *fires* and *ravens*, *pits* and *snakes*, flew in all directions.

Silver crossed her arms over her chest. “I can’t hear anything!”

“I’ll tell it,” Jeremy said, holding up his hands. “Geez. I brought it up in the first place.” He cleared his throat and glanced warily up at the mountain, as if whoever lived up there might hear him. “Okay, so there was this lady named Bedelia Weatherly who lived here in Sudbury a really long time ago.”

“Like a hundred years ago,” Carmela Callahan chimed in.

“*Over* a hundred years ago,” Jeremy continued. “But even way back then, before she was old, people could tell this lady was really, really weird. Like, she never got married, and she never talked to anyone and she spent all her time in the woods digging up plants and stuff. Then one day her house caught on fire, and she went totally cuckoo.”

“Yeah, she blamed us!” Dylan interjected.

“Why’d she blame you?” Silver asked.

“He means the town.” Jeremy sounded impatient. “She blamed everyone in Sudbury for what happened.”

“Why?” Silver looked confused.

“Probably because she got stuck in the house when it was on fire and most of her face got burned off,” said Jeremy.

“Her *face*?” Silver’s eyes widened.

“Yeah. And she thought the people of Sudbury did it on purpose. You know, to get rid of her.”

“And then she disappeared.” Dylan’s voice was ominous. “No one knew where she went. It wasn’t until a few years later that people realized she’d gone to live on Creeper Mountain. And that she’d haunted it to get back at everyone.”

“Haunted it?” I could see Silver’s eyes roving over the trees ahead, taking it all in. “It doesn’t look very haunted to me. Actually, it looks pretty nice.”

“It *was* pretty nice,” Jeremy said. “It was one of the nicest things about the whole town. Big, wide hiking trails, picnic spots, little streams all over.”

“And Shining Falls!” Nathan added.

“And Shining Falls,” Jeremy repeated. “One of the most beautiful waterfalls you’ve ever seen. Crystal blue water, rock steps on the side, a huge pool at the bottom where you could swim . . .” His voice drifted off.

“So what happened?” Silver asked.

“I already told you,” Jeremy said. “She haunted it.”

“How?” Silver was eyeing the mountain suspiciously.

“Well, first, she made these huge, invisible pits all over the mountain. People would be walking along one of the trails, and all of a sudden, the ground would just swallow them up.”

“And they were filled with pointed sticks!” Dylan said. “My dad told me. Sharp as knives!”

“Have you ever heard of a guy named Ray Bradstreet?” Jeremy asked. Silver shook her head. “Well, he fell into one of those pits.” Jeremy sliced the air with the side of his hand. “Completely broke his back. That was twenty years ago. He’s still in a wheelchair.”

Silver’s eyebrows narrowed.

“Then there’s her hornet-head snakes,” Jeremy continued.

“What’s a hornet-head snake?” Silver asked.

“Oh, they’re deadly,” Jeremy said. “There only used to be a few around here, but then Witch Weatherly started breeding them and setting them loose all over the place. They’ve got little horns right above the tops of their eyes and fangs that stick out on either side of their mouths. If they bite you, those fangs go right to the bone. Supposed to be one of the most painful things ever.”

“Plus, if they bite you, you’ll die,” Dylan added. “No one’s ever found a cure for their venom.”

“And then there’s Shining Falls,” Jeremy went on. “Witch Weatherly did something crazy to the water. Now there’s lights that shoot up from the bottom and the surface gets this crazy, eerie glow across it at night. Some

people say she's turned it into her own personal cauldron. You know, like for casting spells."

"And cooking body parts!" Nathan raised a single eyebrow.

Silver cocked her head to one side. "Come on."

"It's true!" Annie Billing said. "And you haven't even gotten to the creepiest part yet." Annie was in my line, near the end. She wore overalls every day and had short black hair that made her look like a boy. "Tell her about the raven."

Was there a way to hum inside my head so that no one would hear? Could I block my eardrums using only the muscles in my neck?

"She has a pet raven." Jeremy's eyes were practically glittering. "She caught it in the wild and trained it. It's huge, like as big as a dog almost. But the really freaky thing is that it's not black like other ravens. It's bloodred."

"It circles the mountain every night at sundown, looking for trespassers," said Nathan.

"And its favorite meal is human eyeballs," Annie said. "For real. It can peck out a person's—"

A whistle sounded suddenly, slicing through the conversation like a shriek. I jumped and then screamed a loud, short sound, and everyone laughed as I clapped my hand over my mouth.

"All right, guys!" Mrs. Danforth yelled. "Time to go back in!"

“She thinks the witch is gonna come down off the mountain and get her!” Jeremy snickered as we filed back in.

“Or the raven!” Dylan hooted.

I didn’t laugh.

I’d probably heard the Witch Weatherly legend a hundred times since I was a little girl. Even Momma and Dad had mentioned it once or twice during dinner.

Still, Witch Weatherly had always just been a story. A scary story, sure. Maybe the scariest story I’d ever been told. But this was the first time I’d seen anything close to actual proof that she was, in fact, more than that.

Somehow, despite all my efforts not to, I’d just seen that thread of smoke that Jeremy had pointed out to everyone.

Which meant only one thing.

Witch Weatherly was much more than a story.

She was real.

She was alive.

And she lived less than ten miles away from my front door.