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*In memory of my dear dad,
who loved nature, books and cloud-gazing.*

CHAPTER ONE

*The Cloud
Delivery*

It was the first cloud that had been delivered to Withering-on-the-Sand-Sea in over four months. Mara watched as the quick figures of the cloud attendants and dispatchers moved around the carriage, checking that the catches and latches and locks that held the hinged roof closed were secure, keeping the cloud protected until it was time for it to be released. She didn't recognize any of the attendants today, which was unusual.

There was quite a crowd from town. People had closed their shops, left their chores half-finished – even lessons at the school were over for the day – all so that everyone could come and see this.

Mara, Fidget her pet squirrel and Old Bern had left the locksmiths and followed their friends and neighbours across the gorge bridge and then up, up, up the sloping hill to Clifftop Farm where the clouds were always delivered. Where they were most needed. Where they did the most good. It was where the folk of Withering had scratched out a few acres of land just about fertile enough to grow a few crops besides the wild rosemary and scraggy pine trees that grew around the town.

As they waited for the cloud to be released, Mara stared out over the fields, across the clifftop, towards the rolling dunes of the sand-sea – the never-ending expanse of sand dunes, where the water-ocean from before the Great Shift had once been. It took all of Mara's imagination to picture the vast watery mass of the ocean, something that now only existed in myths and legends of how the world was before.

It was a blustery day, and swirls of stinging sand whipped and whirled across the fields and into the faces of the assembled crowd. Mara raised her hand to shield her eyes and glanced briefly up into the bright-blue and endlessly cloud-free sky.

'I told you to bring your goggles, lass.' Old Bern smiled at her.

‘Stand clear!’ one of the attendants shouted as another slotted a crank handle into the side of the carriage, readying to open the roof.

Though Mara knew quite well that would not happen until satisfactory payment had been made to the attendants.

‘Make way for the mayor. Make way,’ a weedy little voice, which sounded like it had an eternal cold, called.

Withering’s mayor, Eunice Peabody, was striding up the rise of the clifftop towards the crowd; towards the carriage and the long-awaited cloud. She wore a long dusty coat. Her short, grey hair brushed off her clear face. She was a kind but no-nonsense woman, a good friend of Old Bern, and had been in Mara’s life for as long as she could remember. Struggling to keep ahead of her was her assistant, the weedy-voiced Archie Scrup.

‘Make way there,’ Mr Scrup wheezed. ‘Make way, I said!’

‘Oh, that’s quite enough, Mr Scrup, thank you,’ Mayor Peabody said gently but firmly.

She never hurried or seemed to be in a flap, unlike poor Mr Scrup. She glided along, smiling as the crowd greeted her. She paused to ask after

someone's mother and their recent visit to relatives in Sandsegde, down the coast, and then she carried on to the attendants, who looked rather disgruntled to have been kept waiting.

'Good morning, I trust you've all had a safe and good journey?' the mayor asked. 'Welcome to Withering-on-the-Sand-Sea.'

The assembled attendants and dispatchers mumbled a brief reply. Then one of them – clearly the one in charge – a girl a year or two older than Mara with a white crow perched on her shoulder, strode forward. Mara didn't recognize her either. A kind old gentleman named Verna usually delivered the clouds to Withering. He'd often stay at the Sand-Sea Arms, and always seemed to enjoy catching up with the mayor and Old Bern. Though since Old Bern had fallen ill, pub trips were few and far between. She wondered what had happened to Verna.

'Good morning, I'm Eunice Peabody, Mayor of Wither—'

'Yes, I know who you are, Mayor Peabody,' the girl said briskly. The white crow cawed and flapped its wings, echoing the frustration of the girl who then squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

Mayor Peabody was still head and shoulders taller. ‘And you are?’ she said.

‘Evie, Evie Bainbridge,’ the girl said quickly.

‘Well, may I be the first to officially welcome you to Withering and to thank you for your service in delivering our much-needed cloud.’ Mayor Peabody bowed her head briefly.

‘Have you got the payment?’ the girl asked.

‘I’m sorry?’ the mayor responded.

‘It’s not your cloud until you’ve paid for it. So where’s the payment?’

Some of the other attendants shared curious glances at each other. There were a few intakes of breath from the Withering crowd too. Nobody dared be so rude to the mayor.

Mayor Peabody smiled a small half-smile and gestured to the barn, not far away. The door stood open, and Mara could see the grain and vegetables waiting in their sacks and crates. It had been a struggle for the town to get the payment together due to the late harvest.

‘Is it all there?’ Evie demanded, peering into the barn. ‘I’ve heard there have been problems with payments from Withering in the past?’

‘Well, we never had any complaints from Mr

Verna,' Mayor Peabody explained.

Evie fidgeted a little and didn't quite meet the mayor's gaze. And Mara noticed her cheeks flushing, too – clearly she was used to dealing with people who just coughed up and didn't talk too much.

'But, by all means, please do feel free to inspect it.' Mayor Peabody led Evie over to the barn and, frustratingly, out of Mara's earshot.

After a few minutes of discussion inside the barn doorway and Evie inspecting several of the sacks, Mara noticed that the mayor reached into her pocket and pulled out a small bag. It looked like a coin pouch of some sort. But why would they be giving money to the cloud attendants too? Whatever it was, it did the trick, as Evie turned and raised her hand to the attendants by the cloud carriage. One began to turn the crank handle, and Mara heard the cogs and gears of the carriage roof trundle and clunk.

Slowly, the two sections of the cloud carriage roof began to creak open.

'Here we go,' Old Bern said, unable to hide the excitement in his voice. 'I do *love* this bit!'

There was a gentle spattering of applause from the crowd of watchers as the first wisps of the cloud

peeped over the top of the carriage roof-doors. And then everyone grew quiet. Even Fidget, perched on Mara's shoulder, had fallen silent and still.

It was a plump little cloud, but something about it didn't look quite right to Mara. The colour was off; it was neither brilliant white nor dark grey, which was how most clouds delivered to Withering looked. Perhaps it held a different type of weather? She remembered a snow cloud from years ago, and how most of the town had spent the day playing in its flurries. But clouds hadn't been quite so expensive then.

This one wasn't right at all – it was a slightly sickly sort of yellow colour.

'It's rather small, isn't it?' someone said from the town crowd behind Mara and Old Bern.

'And a kooky old colour too!'

There were murmurs of agreement.

'We'll not get much rain out of that, for sure,' Old Bern said gruffly. 'Eunice won't be happy about another bad cloud.'

He was right. Compared to the clouds they used to get, it was small . . . decidedly so. And yet, from the look of the haul inside the barn, they had paid just as much . . . if not more, given that Mara had

seen the mayor hand across money too. The last few clouds they had received had not been delivered regularly and had looked worse and worse. Mara glanced across at the mayor, but her face gave nothing away.

The disgruntled murmuring grew louder until it caught the attention of Mayor Peabody. She walked across to Evie and the other attendants and raised her hands in the direction of the Withering crowd. ‘Quiet, please.’

‘Ave you seen the size of that thing?’ a large man growled, waving his meaty fist at the cloud. ‘What good’s that gonna do, eh?’

The crowd grumbled in agreement.

Mayor Peabody stared at them until everyone fell quiet.

‘Thank you, Mr Grice. It seems there has been a . . . *change of policy* . . . from the Cloud Factory and recently prices have increased.’

‘And the clouds have shrunk!’ someone added.

Which only resulted in more muttering and chuntering.

The mayor took a deep breath and said calmly, ‘Since there is no other place from which to purchase clouds, Mr Grice, we will continue – as our

foremothers and -fathers have done for centuries and as, no doubt, our daughters, sons and descendants shall also do – to conduct business with the Cloud Factory. Or would you rather our community, our town, our friends and neighbours, floundered . . . failed? We pay, they provide. Any problems, you are welcome to make an appointment with Mr Scrump and come and discuss it – in a civilized manner – in the Guild Hall. I will *not* argue in a field, Mr Grice.’

The rest of the Withering crowd only nodded in agreement.

Old Bern nudged Mara and said quietly, ‘By the sky, she’s good, isn’t she?’

Mara nodded, for Mayor Peabody was nothing short of heroic in Mara’s eyes. Old Bern’s face tightened briefly and he looked away, leaning heavily on his walking stick.

‘You’re feeling OK today?’ Mara asked, reaching towards Old Bern.

‘Don’t you be fussing, girl.’ He frowned and turned slightly away.

He hated being ill, Mara knew, but he hated a fuss even more.

‘Now, shall we enjoy the cloud burst?’ Mayor Peabody asked, and turned back to the attendants,

who were poking and prodding the small cloud with their long staffs. Mara saw a hot, orange light spark at the end of one of the staffs and spread through the soft folds of the cloud. She felt rather sorry for the cloud. There was a time when they didn't have to prod the clouds to get a cloud burst.

Then the cloud started to float up and up, as if it were annoyed.

It gradually grew a little larger and a little darker with some of the yellow disappearing into grey.

'Here it comes,' Old Bern said, his voice full of wonder and expectation.

After a few minutes of drifting up and expanding, the cloud paused. It looked a bit better, but it was still on the small side. Then the cloud started to rain, lightly at first, but enough to raise a round of applause from the watching townspeople. The mayor nodded, satisfied.

A small boy, no older than three or four, hurried towards the field edge and into the drizzle. He held out a small flask, capturing some rain in it. Everyone laughed gently except for Mr Scrupp who dashed forward and pulled the child away from the rain; he also snatched the flask from the child's hand.

'Water rations are collected at the town well as

usual, you have no right to water from this cloud!’
Mr Scrump whined.

The boy’s blushing mother hurried out of the crowd and lifted the bemused child up and away from Mr Scrump, who clung tightly to the flask. The mayor crossed over to him and plucked the flask out of his hands before returning it to the child, apologizing quietly to the mother just as the cloud’s downpour picked up, chilling the air with its dampness. In seconds, the watching crowd had dewy faces from the spray.