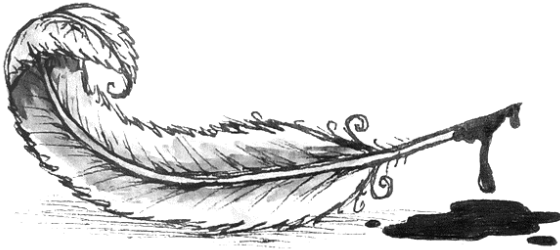


The Society of
**INCREDIBLE
STORIES**
THE BEGINNING OF THE END



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MIKE OAKLEY

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DORMOUSE PUBLISHING

First published in 2020 by Dormouse Publishing

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ISBN: 978-1-9162773-0-4

www.dormouse-publishing.com



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For my wife, Immy, and our two daughters who have watched me sit typing away on a keyboard, muttering to myself, for many a long year.

And in these unprecedented times, I would like to dedicate this book to all the critical workers and NHS staff who have worked tirelessly to keep everybody safe during 2020.

Thank yous!

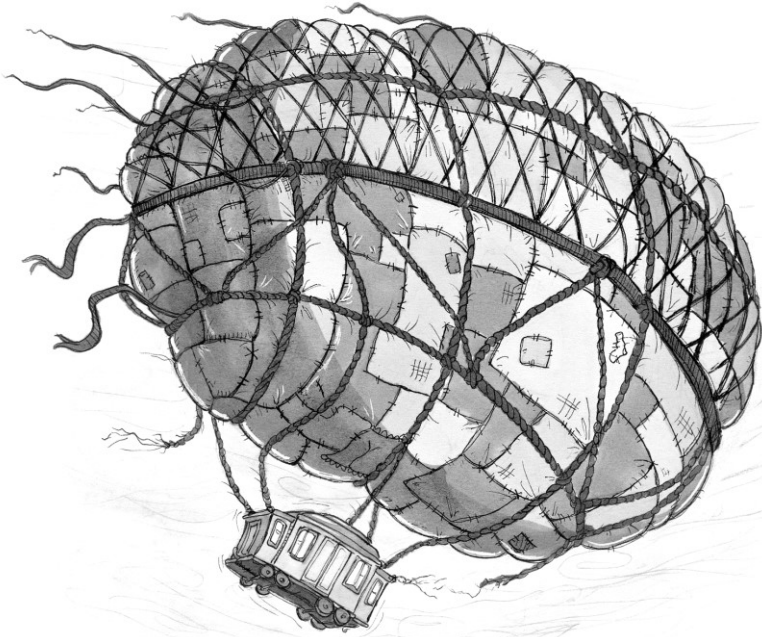
A big thank you goes to my sister-in-law, Helen, whose tireless dedication to editing this tale has transformed my creative musings into something wonderful. I cannot thank you enough.

I would also like to thank Andy, my brother, who has been my creative companion on this journey, supplying not just the fantastic artwork found in this book, but for helping shape the story and characters.

And finally thank you to Becky, Alice, Molly, Sophie and Mattie for reading the book and giving your invaluable feedback.

Prologue

A Journey to Nowhere



As the thick, grey clouds ebbed and flowed across a turbulent sky, a beaten old train carriage, attached to the underbelly of a large hot air balloon, gallantly fought back against The Storm.

On board, with her sturdy boots planted firmly on the polished floorboarded deck, Eliza Monroe stood before her airship's large wooden wheel and stared unflinchingly into the face of chaos. 'It's just you and me now, old girl,' she said, blowing a lock of hair out of her face.

She was well aware of The Storm's infamous reputation for devouring anyone daring, or crazy, enough to venture too close to its wall, but despite the seemingly impossible odds, nothing was going to stop her. She reached over and pulled on a brass lever,

activating a pair of propellers outside. The sudden acceleration made every part of the carriage creak, crack and groan as the airship shot forward. As it thundered towards The Storm wall, Eliza knew that if she were to stand any chance of getting out alive, it wasn't just going to take every ounce of her physical strength, it would take an awful lot of courage and determination too.

Outside the carriage, the wind howled and screamed, and heavy rain hammered against the windows. As The Storm grew ever closer, Eliza felt her heart pounding in her chest and she gripped tightly onto the ship's wheel. 'Come on then, let's see what you've got. I dare you,' she said. As if replying to Eliza's taunt, a sudden and extraordinarily strong gust of wind blew out the carriage's front window, letting the chaos outside rush in. Eliza was instantly blown off her feet. Yet somehow, with her legs flapping freely behind her, she still managed to grip hold of the wheel.



'Like that is it?' she shouted, over the roar of the wind as the carriage veered violently to one side and then the other. The wind roared in her ears and plastered her now wet, curly hair across her

determined face as her beloved carriage, the place she'd called home for most of her life, was being torn apart around her. Any other person would have given up at this point, letting the elements carry them away into the abyss, but not Eliza. She was a Monroe, and Monroes never, ever gave up.

'Is that the best you've got?' she cried. While still gripping onto the wheel, now with just one hand, she dug deep and managed to find the strength to reach over and pull on another brass lever beside her. An elaborate pulley system burst into life, and from the ceiling, a new window swung down to replace the one that was broken, blocking out the wind. Eliza instantly fell to the floor with a thud. Quickly, she scrambled back to her feet and stood behind the wheel again. 'Hah! Your move,' she retorted.

The mighty Storm continued to throw the carriage around, pulling it one way then jerking it the other, spinning it this way and that. All the while the ropes, that were just about holding everything together, continued to creak and groan. Eliza knew that they wouldn't take much more punishment before they finally gave out, and all she could now hope for was that the ropes would last just long enough to see her to safety. Eliza, wiped her brow with the back of her hand, pulled down her smoky goggles and wrapped both her hands around one last lever. 'Don't let me down now, old girl,' she said, taking a deep breath, before jerking the lever forwards.

A fork of lightning suddenly shot across the sky and hit the carriage. With an enormous bang and a shower of sparks, the airship vanished.

Chapter 1

Eliza Monroe's Will

Arthur Boil stared at the old grandfather clock in Mr Mumblecrust's office. Although the pendulum swung back and forth, he felt sure the mechanism inside it was broken. It was either that or time in the old solicitor's office really had ground to a halt. The reality was that Arthur had only been sat with his parents for little more than ten minutes, even though it seemed like hours.

'Look, can we please just get on with it?' said Arthur's father, breaking the silence as he finally lost patience with all the waiting around he was having to do, a thing that really did not come naturally to him. Unlike Arthur, who was content to sit quietly and wait, Mr Boil was more than happy to speak up whenever the occasion arose.

Mr Mumblecrust raised one bushy eyebrow and his thin purple lips pursed as he pointed a single bony finger at the grandfather clock. 'Proceedings shall begin in exactly ten minutes,' he said, placing his hands together on the desk in front of him.

'You what?' said Mr Boil, looking rather lost and annoyed.

'It means, Mr Boil, that when the big hand points up and the little hand...'

'All right, all right, I get it,' snapped back Mr Boil, but Arthur was quite sure he didn't. What Arthur's father made up for in brash confidence, he seriously lacked in intelligence.

Mr Boil groaned. 'This is blooming ridiculous, love,' he said to his wife, crossing his arms.

'What's ridiculous is that you can't sit still for two minutes,' snapped back Mrs Boil.

'Actually it's...' Mr Boil looked at the clock and went quiet as he silently counted his fingers. Finally, he replied, 'Nine minutes, and

that's nine minutes too long. I'm bored, bored, bored.'

Arthur noticed the corner of Mr Mumblecrust's left eye twitch. 'Mr Boil, I have already stated on a number of occasions, we shall begin proceedings at exactly ten o'clock and not a moment before. So, may I suggest, you try and be a little more patient,' he said, picking off an imaginary piece of dirt from his perfectly clean desk.

Arthur could tell that it hadn't taken Mr Mumblecrust long to decide that Arthur and his parents were quite clearly from a much lower class than he was. The moment he saw them, his warm smile had instantly changed. The smile hadn't gone, that was still professionally fixed on his face, but Arthur could see his eyes had lost any flicker of warmth. He clearly hated having to deal with poor people, and they didn't come much poorer than the Boils. All Arthur and his parents had in the world were each other. The only reason they had a roof over their heads was that Arthur's Aunt Eliza had given them one.

Arthur looked over at his mother. She was a tall, sinewy woman, while her husband, the bombastic Mr Boil, was short, gruff and bristly. Arthur looked nothing like his father, but he did share a lot of striking similarities with his mother. Not only were they both tall and thin, they each had a mop of black, curly hair with a white streak running through it. A prominent feature that had also been shared by his Aunt Eliza. A sad realisation hit Arthur; they were all that was now left of the Boil family. Just two weeks earlier there had been four. Mrs Boil sniffed loudly and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

'You okay, mum?' Arthur asked.

'I'm fine, love. Just get a bit upset when I start thinking about my dear sister, that's all.'

Arthur went to his pocket and retrieved his handkerchief and passed it over to her. 'We don't even know that she's, you know...'

'Dead?' said Mr Boil, interrupting. 'She flew into The Storm, son.'

There's no chance of her coming back from that. She'd have been smashed into a million pieces.'

Mrs Boil cried out in anguish.

'Dad!' said Arthur.

Mr Boil looked confused and it took him rather too long to realise his mistake. 'Oh right. Erm, sorry,' he said. 'What I meant to say was that she wouldn't have suffered too much. A mind can only function for so long when the body is being torn to pieces around it.'

Arthur put his face in his hands as Mrs Boil's nostrils flared. Before she could reply, Mr Boil turned to the solicitor. 'Look, Mr Crumblerust,' he said.

'It's pronounced "Mumblecrust".'

'Well, whatever you call yourself, we have clearly been sat for more than ten minutes. So, if you wouldn't mind, I'm supposed to be at a very important meeting at eleven o'clock.'

'Ha!' blurted out Mrs Boil.

'And what was that for?' said Mr Boil, turning to her.

'What meeting have you ever been to? You don't even have a job.'

'What are you talking about woman! I have my own business.'

'Don't you "woman" me, Gerald Boil. If you have your own business then how about you tell Mr Mumblecrust all about it,' she replied. 'I'm sure he'd love to know what it is you do exactly because I haven't the foggiest. I mean, isn't the idea of a business to make more money than you spend? Something you still haven't figured out yet.'

Mr Mumblecrust looked silently on as Arthur mouthed the words 'sorry' to him. Not that that did anything to remove the scowl now on Mr Mumblecrust's wrinkled, grey face.

'I have told you before that these things take time,' continued Mr Boil.

‘And how many years have I been hearing that for? Twenty, twenty-five? Quite honestly, I’ve lost count. If it hadn’t been for my dear sister, well, heaven knows where we’d be living now.’

Mr Boil sighed heavily. ‘Not this again.’

‘Yes, this again, Gerald,’ snapped back Mrs Boil. ‘Why can’t you just get a normal job like everyone else? It’s only because of my dear sister’s generosity and kindness that we have never had to live on the streets and that she let us live with her in the train yard.’ Mrs Boil choked on the last words. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, dabbing her eyes. ‘I just miss her so very much.’

‘Me too mum,’ said Arthur, patting her hand.

Mr Boil crossed his arms and grumbled something unsympathetic under his breath before Mr Mumblecrust finally found a moment to speak. ‘Mr Boil, once more let me make this clear to you, the will shall be read at ten o’clock, and not a second earlier. Is that understood?’

Mr Boil huffed loudly, and, like a very impatient and very hairy



spoilt child, he went back to angrily swinging his short legs backwards and forwards under his chair.

After the few long minutes had passed, the grandfather clock finally chimed, and Mr Boil let out a great sigh of relief. ‘At last! I thought I was going to die of boredom,’ he said.

Mr Mumblecrust ignored the outburst and instead turned his attention to Mrs Boil. Arthur jumped as Mr Mumblecrust attempted a sympathetic expression which, to Arthur, looked rather terrifying. ‘I read the story in the papers about your sister’s... mishap, Mrs Boil. Most unfortunate,’ he said.

Mrs Boil dabbed her nose with Arthur’s handkerchief and just about managed to smile back.

‘I understand that she was in possession of quite a bit of land?’

‘You bet she was!’ said Mr Boil, grinning.

Mrs Boil gave her husband a look that swiftly wiped the grin off his face. She then turned her attention back to Mr Mumblecrust. ‘If you must know, yes,’ she replied. ‘The entire train yard belonged to her.’

‘I see,’ Mr Mumblecrust replied, and Arthur didn’t like the way he said that one bit. The room fell silent. Mr Mumblecrust turned over the sealed envelope in front of him. ‘Well, if we are all ready, I shall begin proceedings,’ he said.

‘About blooming time!’ Mr Boil said, vigorously rubbing his hairy little hands together.

Again, that was a little too enthusiastic for Mrs Boil’s liking and she shot her husband a look that froze his hands in place before he slowly put them back in his lap.

Mr Mumblecrust cleared his throat. ‘Mrs Boil, I shall now read to you, in accordance with The Collective Law, the will concerning the estate of your sister, Miss Eliza Monroe,’ he said, before opening the envelope in front of him with a small silver knife and removing the letter from within it. ‘My dearest family,’ he read, ‘it

is with a heavy heart that I have left this world for another.’ Mrs Boil sniffed back tears. Mr Mumblecrust waited a moment before continuing, ‘All I hope is you may all join me soon.’ Mr Mumblecrust’s eyebrows furrowed. ‘I can assure you madam that I am only relaying to you what is written here in the will,’ he said, holding up the letter to prove his point.

‘Can’t we just, you know, skip the boring part and get to the bit that matters, if you catch my drift?’ said Mr Boil, winking at Mr Mumblecrust while rubbing his thumb and fingers together in the expectation there could be money coming his way.

‘Dad!’ hissed Arthur, gesturing to his mother.

Mrs Boil was staring at her husband with thunderous eyes and Mr Boil realised he was in trouble again. ‘W-what I meant to say was, can’t we go a little quicker since this is quite an upsetting day for my dear wife?’ he said. Mrs Boil huffed loudly, making it quite clear she didn’t believe a word of it.

‘Mr Boil, I am legally bound to read the will out in full, every last word of it, and that is what I intend on doing,’ said Mr Mumblecrust. ‘I simply request you adopt an acceptable level of patience.’

‘All right, all right, keep your bloomin’ wig on Mr Crinklybust. It was only a suggestion.’

Arthur noted Mr Mumblecrust’s left eye twitch again at that remark.

‘Will you just shut up, you old fool, and let the man do his job,’ said Mrs Boil.

Mr Boil huffed and crossed his arms. ‘There’s me only thinking of your feelings. That’s really hurt me that has. Well you do what you like then and don’t be surprised if I nod off.’

Composing himself the best he could, Mr Mumblecrust took a deep breath. ‘If you have quite finished?’ he said. Mr Mumblecrust shot Mr Boil a challenging look before looking down at the letter

and continuing. 'I'm sure you are all wondering what will happen to my yard,' he read. Mr Mumblecrust licked his finger and slowly turned to the next page before carrying on, 'I spent a long time deciding who should actually inherit it. The one thing I am absolutely certain of is that it should go to one of my family. The last thing I want is for it to go to that pompous twit, Mr Mumblecrust.'

'Well really!' said Mr Mumblecrust, his face flushing with anger. Arthur stifled a laugh.

'I'm so sorry. I'm sure she didn't mean it. My sister was quite the joker,' said Mrs Boil, rather embarrassed.

'As long as she was a rich one, who cares?' replied Mr Boil, winking at Arthur.

Mrs Boil gave her husband yet another withering look before she turned back to the solicitor. 'Please try and ignore my husband, Mr Mumblecrust. Much to my constant embarrassment, he really is quite the most insufferable fool.'

'So, it seems,' he said under his breath, before he cleared his throat and continued. 'Here's the bit you've been waiting for, who gets what,' he read. Mr Boil, quite literally, sat on the edge of his seat. 'I leave all of my worldly possessions to my loyal friend, Trip,' said Mr Mumblecrust. Before he could continue, Mr Boil had jumped to his feet and was turning a worrying shade of purple. 'She's only gone and left everything to that blooming flea ridden cat,' he blurted out. He then started pacing the office, cursing some pretty ripe words under his breath.

'Mr Boil! Will you PLEASE sit down and moderate your passion!' said Mr Mumblecrust, now getting really rather angry.

Mr Boil was in no mood to take orders. 'She never did like me. Thought I wasn't good enough for her precious sister, she did.'

'You surprise me,' Mr Mumblecrust said through gritted teeth.

'I hated 'er in life and now I hates 'er in death too! Well, this is

for you, Eliza!’ Mr Boil looked up at the ceiling and blew a rather long and impressive raspberry.

‘Gerald! Really!’ Mrs Boil said, exasperatedly. ‘That’s my dear sister you’re speaking ill of, you ruddy insensitive buffoon!’

‘Well, Lily, dead or not, she deserved it!’ he replied.

‘MR BOIL!’ said Mr Mumblecrust, the floodgates to his temper now fully open. ‘SIT! DOWN! I won’t ask you again.’

‘Do as you are told, you stupid old fool! You’re embarrassing the lot of us,’ said Mrs Boil, looking over at Mr Mumblecrust with an ashamed expression on her face. ‘I’m so sorry. He gets a little wound up at times,’ she said.

Arthur was watching all of this with an amused smile on his face. It was true that Arthur’s aunt didn’t like his father. She’d told Arthur that his dad was always only ever interested in making money the easy way. ‘Doing nothing, Arty, produces nothing,’ she’d said to him on so many occasions he’d lost count.

Mr Boil grumbled and cursed under his breath, but he did finally do as he was told. Like a sulking child, with his bottom lip sticking out, he sat back down heavily in his chair and crossed his arms again.

After Mr Mumblecrust had taken a few long and rather deep breaths, he picked up the letter again. ‘If you care to listen there is actually more,’ he began.

‘What’s the point, she’s given everything away,’ said Mr Boil. ‘We may as well go home, not that we have one to go to now.’

‘Oh, will you just shut up Gerald,’ said Mrs Boil before she turned to the solicitor. ‘Please, do carry on Mr Mumblecrust.’

Mr Mumblecrust composed himself. ‘Thank you,’ he said, looking back down at the will and continued, ‘I leave all of my worldly possessions to my loyal friend, Trip, AND to my wonderful, caring sister and her beaky nosed, money grabbing fool of a husband.’

Arthur's father couldn't believe his ears and he leapt to his feet crying out the most heartiest of 'hurrahs!'. He then did a merry jig around the office hopping from one foot to the other. 'Good old Eliza! Always liked the girl. God rest her soul,' he said with a great toothy grin on his face. 'We're rich! Rich! RICH!' he squealed, his voice getting higher and higher while he continued to dance around the room, giddy on his new-found wealth.



Mrs Boil, on the other hand, dabbed fresh tears away from her eyes and looked down into her lap. 'Unlike my foolish, cold-hearted husband, Mr Mumblecrust, I would happily trade everything just to spend one more day with my dear sister,' she said.

'Dad!' said Arthur.

Mr Boil realised he should probably have been a little more sensitive, and he sat back down. Now quite out of breath, he

stretched over Arthur and patted his wife on the hand. ‘There, there dearest, don’t cry,’ he said, grinning at her. ‘Surely, this should be a day of celebration, no?’

Arthur looked on mortified as his father then went cross-eyed and tried to look at the generous protrusion sticking out of his face. ‘Is my nose really that beaky, my love?’

‘Yes, like a parrot’s, you ruddy great buffoon!’ she said.

Arthur stifled a laugh. The solicitor cleared his throat. ‘If you care to listen, I haven’t actually finished yet,’ he said, now sounding like he wanted nothing more than to get the Boil family out of his office for good. Arthur and his parents looked at Mr Mumblecrust before he continued, ‘To my beloved nephew, Arthur Tobias Montgomery Boil.’ Arthur was taken aback to hear his name. ‘I give to you this letter.’ Mr Mumblecrust passed Arthur an envelope sealed firmly with a blob of red wax.

The full book will be released as an ebook and paperback on the
5th November 2020

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