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The Fabulous World of Mona Flint

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Tingling toes and an unbelievable letter

Chapter 1, in which it turns out that the dull-as-ditchwater town of Firley-on-Ansel isn't as dull as ditchwater after all, and in which a surprising ban is announced.

Nothing can spoil Mona Flint's good mood this morning, not even stale rye bread. The holidays are here and Mona has lots planned. After breakfast, she's meeting her best friend Jackie on the pig playground. And they're planning to spend the entire day together. Mona smiles, pushes her wild, mousey-brown curls out of her face and taps her foot against the chair leg.

'Mona Flint, you're not listening to me,' Mrs Blue scolds as she attempts to spread rock-hard butter onto Mona's stubborn slice of rye bread.

Most children have parents. Mona has Mrs Blue. She's all right, and her name is so wonderful that Mona doesn't need any other for her. Mona likes Mrs Blue, and she knows she likes her too, even though she doesn't go out of her way to say it. Mona can just sense it. She has lived in the 'House for Stranded Children' for as long as she can remember. That's what Mrs Blue calls it, ever since she first found Mona, with a name bracelet on her tiny wrist, outside her front door. As if the baby had just been washed up by the River Ansel. Over the years, four more children besides Mona had washed up at Mrs Blue's: Billy, Zoé, Noah and Tarek. Mona always imagines that they'd all been shipwrecked after a heroic battle. If someone gets stranded somewhere, it can only be because they've been on a wild adventure and survived great danger. Sometimes, Mona whispers stories of these adventures to the others, while they lie in their bunk beds, cosy under the covers.

Some people think Mrs Blue takes in children when nobody else wants them. They haven't got a clue, in Mona's opinion.

Mrs Blue is strict, but fair. You can depend on anything she says. That's not always the case. Take Jackie's parents, for example. Jackie's name is really Jakob Pfeiffer and he lives in the house opposite Mona's. His dad is Mr Pfeiffer and his mum is Dr Pfeiffer-Fuchs. They are okay--no, they're actually really nice. They read to him, they say, 'I love you, Jackie darling;' they buy him things and make sure he eats healthy food. But you can't depend on them. They have a lot of important work to do and they often forget promises they've made. That's really irritating. But Jackie still loves them. You just have to work with what you've got. That's what Mrs Blue always says. She only makes promises she can keep. And she doesn't make such a fuss.

'Mona!' says Mrs Blue now, a little louder. 'I'm talking to you!'

'Oh.' Mona looks at the slice of bread in front of her, smeared with flattened lumps of butter. 'Can I have some jam?'

Mrs Blue passes Mona the strawberry jam. Mona piles it generously on top of the butter.

'I'm going to the dentist with Noah and Tarek later. Then we're going shopping,' says Mrs Blue, casting a reproachful look at the fridge, as if it had emptied itself on purpose. She sighs and adds: 'Billy and Zoé have already gone to football camp. I hope Billy manages not to hit anyone this time.'

'If Billy hits someone, you know they deserve it,' replies Mona, her mouth full.

'I'm not so sure about that,' murmurs Mrs Blue.

Then she fixes Mona with her gaze. 'Mona, please promise me that you and Jacob will play near the pig playground or at his house. Or here at ours. Under no circumstances go to Crow Street.'

'Why not?' asks Mona, astonished.

'Some really weird people moved into the old villa two weeks ago,' says Mrs Blue, before pointing at a bit of jam on Mona's chin. 'You've got a little something there.'

Mona wipes off the jam with her finger and peers furtively at her notebook. Firley-on-Ansel is dull as ditchwater. It's a little town where there aren't any weird people and nothing unusual ever happens. But Mona's notebook tells a different story. Those stripy frogs, for example. Mona and Jackie had found several of them all at once on the banks of the Ansel.

Mona had thought they were pretty freaky and she had drawn one in her notebook. She'd written 'Freaky stripy frog. Discovered: Ansel' under the picture, with the date and time. Like a biologist on the hunt for new species.

And then Jackie and Mona had come across even more unusual things, verging on the impossible. Like the singing lanterns on Crow Street. Or Mrs Palladin's sausage dog, whom they had seen *floating* across the marketplace, panting happily.

'I mean it,' Mrs Blue repeats in a serious voice. 'Don't go to Crow Street. You're not allowed to play there any more.'

Peculiar. Mrs Blue has always said she can't stand things being forbidden. What's got into her?

And why now of all times, when the holidays have started and Mona and Jackie had been planning to get to the bottom of all the unbelievable goings-on in Firley once and for all. And Crow Street of all places--after all, that's exactly where a lot of the strange things have been happening.

Mrs Blue really ought to know better. When something isn't allowed, it gives Mona an almost unbearable tingling in her toes. And pretty much every time she's ever been in trouble, it's started out with exactly this tingling. But Mona doesn't want any trouble!

'Don't go to Crow Street,' Mona repeats mechanically. 'Can I have another piece of bread and jam?'

Mrs Blue cuts Mona another slice of bread and almost drops it when she hears the snap of the letter box. The House for Stranded Children has the loudest letter box in the world, or so Jackie says. Although when Mrs Blue retrieves the post from it, it doesn't make half as much noise, which means it's not just the letter box.

'Oh no, not another letter from the building authority,' moans Mrs Blue as she comes back into the kitchen. She tears open the envelope and scans the letter. The House for Stranded Children has become rather dilapidated in recent years. The roof is leaking in two places on the top floor. Half of the windows no longer shut properly and the other half won't open. However, the house belongs to the town of Firley. And according to the people, or rather the man, at the building authority, repairing it would be too expensive. It would be cheaper to tear it down. But unfortunately the man doesn't have any suggestions about where Mrs Blue and the children should live instead. 'It's not easy, with children like that,' he says.

Mona takes a defiant bite of crust. If the building authority chap wants to tear down our house, I'll put fat slugs in his bed every night, she decides. And she pictures him hopping around his bedroom, shrieking, and thinking: *If only we'd repaired that beautiful old house!*

Mrs Blue puts down the letter. 'I'm afraid I'll have to take a trip to the building authority today too.'

Mona nods. 'When you do, be sure to give them a piece of your mind!'

Mrs Blue furrows her brow, puts the letter back in the envelope and throws it on the table. 'I'm just going down to the basement to start on that mountain of washing,' she says with false cheerfulness, 'before it gets higher than Everest.'

Mona is alarmed. As Mrs Blue's footsteps disappear down the basement stairs, she pulls the envelope slowly towards her. What does the letter say? It must be something serious for Mrs Blue to react like that.

The letter is bureaucratic and boring and is written in such a way that Mona has to read it three times, just to understand it. There is one sentence that pierces her heart more deeply each time she reads it:

'We must therefore inform you that due to the current budgetary situation, it will not be possible to renovate the children's home and we must request that you vacate the property by 30th September.'

Mona is hit by a realisation: soon she won't be able to live here any more! Her hand shakes. The House for Stranded Children is the only real home she has ever had. It's something special! But a person who writes such incredibly stupid letters doesn't have a hope of understanding that.

Mona runs her hand over her notebook. 'Unbelievable' is written in large print letters on the cover. And that's exactly what the book contains: in this book, Mona and Jackie make notes of all the unbelievable things they come across. Unbelievably great or crazy things. But of course, unbelievably stupid things too. Mona fishes a pen out of her satchel and writes:

- Building authority wants to throw stranded children out of their house!

'As if we'll stand for that!' Mona murmurs and in that moment she decides: nobody is throwing the stranded children out of anywhere. She'll find a way to make this right. Together with Jackie.

After all, they really are experts when it comes to unbelievable things.

The thought makes her happy again. It's the holidays, and they will think of a way to save her home. Mona Flint always thinks of something!

On Crow Street

Chapter 2, in which two children take a forbidden excursion, a guard dog does its job and a couple of really weird people are clearly up to no good.

After her fourth slice of bread and jam, Mona heads out. She leaps down the stairs to the street below, the *Unbelievable Notebook* in her satchel. The two little ones, Noah and Tarek, are racing around the yard on their scooters. Noah is five, almost six, as he always points out. Nobody knows how old Tarek is. He has a long journey behind him and he doesn't talk. Some adventures are simply too big for someone so small, Mona thinks. But one day, even Tarek will be big enough. Then he'll definitely talk. Mona and Mrs Blue picked out a day to celebrate Tarek's birthday. That was Mona's idea. She thinks everyone needs a day that just belongs to them.

She strolls down the street, whistling to herself. The sun shines down, warm and gentle, on sleepy Firley. Jackie is already waiting at the pig playground. The pig playground owes its name to Annie, the pot-bellied pig who lives in a pen next to the playground. Annie is almost always asleep. Sometimes Mona and Jackie are scared that she's dead. But then she flicks away a fly with a wiggle of her ear, or she farts, loudly and contentedly. Today, Annie is awake. Jackie has brought her an apple like always, which she chomps happily while he pets her through the fence.

A beaming smile spreads across Jackie's freckled face when he spots Mona.

'Man, am I happy it's the holidays!'

'Me too,' agrees Mona, patting the pig, who in that moment is overcome by tiredness and slumps onto her side with a sigh. Jackie points to Mona's bag.

'Quick, write it down! Unbelievable but true, Annie was awake for longer than five minutes!'

Mona pulls out the *Unbelievable Notebook* and shakes her head. 'I've already written something in there today, Jackie. Here, read it! It's really important.'

Jackie pushes his beanie hat back on his head in surprise and starts to read. He wears a beanie even in summer; it's his thing. Even Mrs Piper-Fox has given up trying to talk him out of it.

'What does this mean, is the building authority kicking you out?' he asks in shock. 'They're not allowed to do that.'

Mona tells him about the letter. 'Someone has to repair our house,' she concludes. 'Then they won't be able to tear it down any more.'

'But who?' murmurs Jackie, glumly.

Mona doesn't know either. 'I wish I were filthy rich, then I would just buy our house,' she says.

'How does one get to be filthy rich?' asks Jackie, staring at the other new entry in the notebook, lost in his thoughts:

- Mrs Blue forbids something without a good reason.

'Mrs Blue told you you weren't allowed to do something?' he asks, astonished.

Mona nods. 'She doesn't want us to go to Crow Street. Because some weird people have been living there for the past two weeks. Strange, don't you think?'

Jackie shakes his head, uncomprehending. 'Mrs Blue never thinks anyone is weird! That really is unbelievable. And Crow Street is where we wanted to start today with our investigations. The singing lanterns...' He grins. 'Oh well, we've found so many unbelievable things, let's start somewhere else.' He turns back a page in the notebook. Then he reads, jubilantly:

- The lanterns on Crow Street sing every evening between 6 and 7 o'clock.
- Mrs Palladin's sausage dog floats around like a balloon. (Tied him to the bike rack so he didn't fly away.)
- Something in Mr White's dustbin explodes whenever he opens the lid.
- A talking cat scares Mrs Ermisch half to death.
- There are candy apples growing on Margaret Miller's apple tree. (She can't stand candy apples.)
- The town council was out of action for two consecutive days because they were all sleeping like Sleeping Beauty. Including the man in the building authority. (Good!)

Every time Jackie reads out something unbelievable, Mona feels her toes tingling a little more. All of these things are just totally impossible! Her town, Firley-on-Ansel, is one of those places where nothing out of the ordinary ever happens. It's peaceful, orderly and a bit boring. Sensational occurrences are something that happen on the news in other places. But nevertheless, they had seen these things and written them down. How could this be?

'Man,' says Jackie. 'Why aren't the adults flipping out about all this? They get so worked up about everything else. And all of a sudden a cackling goldfish flies past and nobody bats an eye?'

Mona giggles, leafing through the notes. 'Where does it say about the goldfish?' Then she notices something. 'Strange. Two weeks ago, we discovered those stripy frogs. Before that, there are only things like "Billy makes it through five consecutive games without being sent off", "Pigeon hatches on Jackie's windowsill" and "Dragonflies can fly backwards". All completely harmless. It's only after that that the entries turn crazy.'

Jackie scratches his head beneath his hat. 'Wait a minute! Two weeks ago, you say? Think about it! What else happened two weeks ago?'

Mona snaps her fingers. 'That's when the weird people moved into Crow Street, Mrs Blue said. Into the old villa. That can't be a coincidence.'