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Opening extract from

The Imagination Box

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Prologue

'There is a box. Anything you imagine will appear inside. You have one go, one chance to create *anything* you want. What would you pick?'

The professor's voice echoed through the huge theatre. He sipped his water, breathing deliberately. For him, this was a big moment.

The audience waited quietly, hundreds of men and women – a sea of faces. There were academics, press and select members of the public, all pondering the question. A cube-shaped object, about the size of a microwave, was on the desk next to him. Although a purple, velvet sheet was hiding the item, every eye in the room drifted towards it. With a deep breath, he arranged his notes on the lectern in front of him,

pressed the little button on his microphone, cleared his throat and began to speak once more.

'Such a device, indeed, sounds impossible . . .'

His nerves had calmed a little; he glanced down – his hands were almost steady. The professor then took the microphone from its stand and walked confidently across the stage to the hidden desk.

'And yet, here we are,' he said, 'at the beginning. Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I present to you, on this humble stage, on this humble Saturday . . .' He whisked the sheet off his invention. The crowd watched on, silent now . . .

Chapter 1

One month earlier . . .

The Dawn Star Hotel stood proud, even in the rain. A muggy storm swelled above the city. Tim was sitting in the hotel's huge, well-lit reception, looking out at the flurry of rush-hour workers making their way home.

It was the first day of the first week of the summer holidays. As usual, Tim was drawing. Hunched over a bird's eye view of the umbrellas outside, he scribbled away. As he was a bit of a messy artist his picture didn't *really* resemble the rainy street scene at all. But he knew what it was meant to be and surely that's all that mattered.

'Don't you touch that sofa,' Elisa shrieked, rushing across the lobby.

She barrelled towards Tim as if getting marks on the cushions was an emergency of giant proportions. Wetting her cloth with the bottle of spray she was clutching, she began firmly scrubbing at Tim's hands. She huffed when she saw pencil smudges on his face. Tim frowned at the smell of the cloth as it scraped up and down his cheek. This wasn't the first time she had cleaned him in the same manner she cleaned any other object. In wide-eyed horror he watched a huge drip of soapy water splash on to his masterpiece. He slammed his sketch pad shut.

'I have told you more than once about sitting here,' Elisa said.

'I was drawing the people outside.'

'The consultant is arriving shortly. The last thing he'll want to see is you sitting in reception covered in pencil lead.'

'I doubt that's the *last* thing he'll want to see,' Tim muttered. Nonetheless, he gathered his pencils and stood to leave.

'And, Tim, don't touch the cakes in the function room. They're for the staff – Donald's called a meeting.'

Tim headed out of the reception area, pushing his way through the broad oak doors into the long red-and-gold-carpeted hallway. Eyes fixed on the floor beneath, he let his imagination get the better of him. In his mind, this wasn't a carpet at all, *this* was a river of lava and the spirals were his stepping stones. Treading on the lighter parts would, therefore, result in a grizzly death. So he hopped from rock to rock, past the ground floor rooms, each with the same door but a different, ascending bronze number.

Hang on, what's this? Delicious smells from the function room at his side slowed his pace. Chocolate? Certainly. Strawberry sponge? Without a doubt. He stopped. Tasty, fresh and, most appealingly of all, forbidden cakes; how could he possibly resist such temptation?

But wait: Tim spotted Mary, the decidedly dumpling-shaped chambermaid, at the service cupboard, preparing to do her rounds – the slight whiff of bleach and fresh towels rising from her trolley.