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Opening extract from

Molly Moon and the Morphing Mystery

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Chapter One

It was a winter afternoon. Briersville Park was sodden and glistening. Rain pelted down, hitting the vegetable garden path with a vengeance, smacking its green algae surface so that each drop split into a hundred smaller drops that bounced up again. Two frogs hid under the outstretched leg of a stone cupid in the centre of a pond and the orange fish there dived to its murky bottom for shelter.

Water dripped down AH2's dark face. His black, snug, weatherproof trousers and jacket were covered in mud, since he'd just spent fifteen minutes crawling through three llama fields towards this grand house. Now he pulled his balaclava back behind his ears so that he could better hear. Children's voices, whoops and shouts, and the sound of barking were coming from the other side of a high wall.

There was a heavy door set in the brickwork, but he didn't dare use that. Instead, taking a furtive look about

to check he wasn't watched, he put his hands on the leafless branches of an old apple tree that was fastened to the wall. With the ease of a trained soldier, he climbed up to its crest.

There she was. He was certain. The alien girl who went by the name Molly Moon was playing at the edge of a swimming pool with two boys who AH2 guessed were the same age as the Moon girl – about eleven years old. One was the black boy AH2 recognized from an advert that he and Molly Moon had starred in. Beside him was another boy who looked like he was the alien girl's twin. He had similar light brown curly hair and the same potato-shaped nose and identical strong but closely set green eyes. Was this boy an alien too?

AH2 twitched. Then he got a shock.

All of a sudden a large, grey object that he had presumed was a sunken, blow-up dinghy emerged from the pool. It was an elephant and it squirted a few gallons of water at the children, drenching them further and making the small black pug that was with them bark. The children laughed and shouted at the elephant before it tipped its body back towards the deep end for another swim.

AH2 shook his head in nonplussed amazement, then returned to his task. Quickly, he unzipped his front jacket pocket and pulled out a small loaded rifle, resting it on the top of the wall. He peered through its sights. Molly Moon's head and shoulders came into view. Her wet hair fell to one side, exposing a fairly wide expanse

of her neck. AH2 gritted his teeth. If only Molly Moon would stop jumping up and down and if only that look-alike boy would get out of the way. AH2 waited patiently until Molly Moon's neck was aligned in the red target circle of his rifle's sights again. He waited for the elephant. His aim was to use the animal as a distraction and to shoot at the same moment as the elephant hosed the children down.

The elephant rose up from the water and fired. At the same time, AH2 pulled the trigger. His dart hit first; the water hit Molly Moon a split second later. Everyone screeched, and in the commotion of the moment Molly Moon's yelp was lost. She reached up and cupped her neck.

'Ow, Amrit!' she complained. 'That water had a stone in it!'

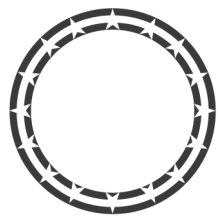
'Bingo!' AH2 murmured. He dropped silently from the garden wall and ran towards the llama fields. Running swiftly and darting behind the animal-shaped bushes there wherever possible, he made his way to the far woods beyond to where his black car was parked. Slipping into the front seat he took his balaclava and his jacket off and reached for the brown package on the passenger seat.

Drying his hands, he unpacked the red radio-like box inside it and pulled out its aerial. Switching the device on, he pointed it in the direction of Briersville Park, to its gardens and its swimming pool. The machine bleeped reassuringly.

‘Got you, alien Moon girl,’ AH2 said with a satisfied smack of his lips. He picked up his phone and tapped in a message to his superior, AH1.

‘MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.’

Chapter Two



Molly and Micky Moon were sitting in an emerald-green sports car, speeding up the motorway under a heavy grey sky. Molly felt like some sort of pet animal, as she was stuffed in the cramped space behind the two front seats. Her twin brother, Micky, was in the passenger seat, and their new tutor, Miss Hunroe, sat at the wheel.

Miss Hunroe was very glamorous-looking and not at all like Molly thought a tutor should be. Her hair was peroxide blonde and kinked so that it almost formed stairs down the side of her head. Her hazel eyes, which Molly could see in the rear-view mirror, watching any approaching cars that might be trying to overtake her, were large and long-lashed. And her pale skin had a clean translucent beauty. Her cheeks were tinged a pretty, wholesome pink. Her clothes were very unteacherly too.

She wore a smart cream suit with a silk shirt underneath and on one of her red-nailed fingers she wore a heavy gold ring with an emerald embedded in it.

She steered the car with her left hand. Her right hand meanwhile held a gold coin. As she drove, she flipped it along her fingers so that it turned like a rolling wheel in between her knuckles. Every time another car obstructed the fast lane, she would flip the gold coin, saying, 'Heads!' or, 'Tails!' She'd catch the coin on the back of her right hand. If she won the toss, she'd flash her lights and drive really close to the car in front until the vehicle moved over and let her pass. Then she'd speed off – well over a hundred miles an hour, until the offending car was a long way behind.

Molly gripped the back of Micky's chair. Miss Hunroe's driving, along with her rose-scented perfume, was making Molly feel sick. She hoped she wouldn't be. That would really spoil the day, she thought, if she was sick all over the leather seats of Miss Hunroe's car.

'Interesting way of driving,' Micky commented drily, looking up from his crossword puzzle book as yet again Miss Hunroe flipped her coin and started to flash at the van in front.

'It keeps me amused,' Miss Hunroe replied. 'I like to see the law of odds in action. There's a fifty-fifty chance that I should or shouldn't overtake, yet somehow this coin always lands on what I've guessed it will land on. So I always overtake! It's as if the coin wants to get back to London as quickly as possible!'

And so on they drove, as if in some sort of a race, upsetting the other traffic on the road, causing other drivers to raise fists and blast their horns. Molly stared at the straight road ahead, as she knew that an eye on the horizon would help her carsick feeling. She watched a cat-shaped cloud turn into the shape of a dragon and kept watching the clouds until her stomach felt better. Every so often Micky began a conversation with Miss Hunroe. These went something like, 'Butanoic acid. Miss Hunroe, isn't that the name of the colourless liquid that causes that nasty rancid smell in butter?' or 'That word CACHE . . . Miss Hunroe, do you spell it like that? Does it mean "a secret place where a store of things is kept hidden"?' Or, when Micky had moved on to his special book of riddles, he started to test Miss Hunroe:

'The beginning of Eternity,
The end of time and space,
The beginning of every end,
And the end of every place. What am I?

Shall I tell you, Miss Hunroe? . . . The answer's E. The letter E. Clever, eh?'

'Sorry, dear, I can't talk. I'm driving,' was usually Miss Hunroe's answer to whatever question or riddle Micky threw at her and so he went on with his puzzles alone, or he looked out of the window or craned his neck to talk to Molly or consulted his compass to see in which direction they were heading.

*

AH2 drove behind in his sleek black car, keeping his distance. His locater box was switched on so that, however crazily the emerald-green sports car drove, he could always tell where the alien girl, Molly Moon, was. He sucked on cool mints and listened to space-age ambient music that twanged and tocked, reminding him, he thought, of the size of the universe. He wondered how far away Molly Moon's planet was. And he thrilled to think that soon he would be about to meet a real, living extra terrestrial.

Finally the countryside gave way to concrete and brick and soon he was driving over a flyover road, past a glass and steel office block on to the main drag into London.

'Ah the smoke!' Miss Hunroe gasped. 'Culture and art! Heaven! Nearly in! Kensington and Chelsea soon! And the weather doesn't seem to be bad at all!'

Both sides of the road now became punctuated by black taxis with their famous old-fashioned curvy design. Big, red, double-decker buses chugged past. Some were open-ended at the back so that people could jump on and off at traffic lights. And quicker than Molly had expected, they came to their destination.

As the car drove alongside the tall iron railings of a giant Victorian building with four gothic towers, Miss Huroe announced, 'So here we are! The Natural History Museum! This is where lessons start.' She swerved the car into a DIPLOMATS ONLY parking space.

'What's a diplomat?' Molly asked.

'It's a special person,' said Micky, 'who works for the government of a country. Their job is to go and live in *another* country where they sort out stuff for the people of their *own* country in that *other* country, if you see what I mean.' Then he looked at Miss Hunroe as though through a magnifying glass. 'You're not a diplomat, are you, Miss Hunroe?'

'Oh no!' Miss Hunroe answered, adjusting her wavy, blonde hair and turning the car's rear-view mirror to put on her red lipstick.

'Um, then won't you get a ticket?' Molly asked.

'Definitely not. I've made arrangements,' declared their new tutor mischievously, slotting a pass of some sort into a plastic holder on the windscreen.

They all got out. Molly's legs felt very stiff when she stood up straight. She shook them out.

The previous day Molly had been sitting in one of the attic rooms of Briersville Park, on a wide window ledge with her legs pulled up to her chin. Rocky, the boy she'd grown up with in the Briersville orphanage, Hardwick House, had been leaning against the wall whilst Micky sat in a red armchair, with Petula, their black pet pug at his feet. He'd been scouring the papers for interesting news and reading bits out from a book of riddles to Molly and Rocky. A fire crackled in the hearth. They were all in dry clothes now that they were back inside from spending all afternoon with Amrit, their pet elephant, who loved to play in the pool.

Molly remembered how ill Rocky had looked. How he had flopped down in the furry chair and pulled a cushion on top of himself. His brown skin appeared greyer. He looked like he was catching the flu, the same flu that Ojas, their Indian friend, had caught. It was then that the phone had gone. Molly had picked it up. It was Lucy Logan.

'Hello, Molly, it's me.'

'Oh, hi, Lucy.' Molly couldn't quite bring herself to call Lucy Logan 'Mum' even though she was her mum. She was of course Micky's mum too, and Rocky and Ojas's adopted mum, but all of them called her Lucy. She had been away with Ojas and Primo for a night in Yorkshire.

'How are things?'

'Fine, well, sort of. Rocky's ill. Is Ojas better?'

'Not really, and now your dad, erm, Primo's, feeling bad too. We'll be back tonight, but, annoyingly, after dinner. The weather is shocking. It's as if there's been a freak storm. We're in a terrible traffic jam. Apparently a huge lorry full of milk skidded and turned over. It's completely blocked the motorway.'

'Well, you know what they say?' Molly replied. 'Don't cry over spilt milk!'

Lucy laughed down the phone. 'Well, we won't, but it is a bit boring. We could practically walk back quicker. But listen, don't forget, the new tutor is coming for supper tonight. Be polite. Show her around. And we got the elephant chair . . .'

In the background, Molly could hear Ojas's voice. 'The howdah,' he corrected Lucy.

'Yes, the howdah. We think it will fit Amrit perfectly.'

When Molly put the phone down, Micky glanced up from the papers. 'Says here there's a flu epidemic happening.' He wrinkled his nose crossly. 'Wish I'd remembered to pack some medicine before I left the twenty-sixth century.'

'Wish you had,' Rocky moaned. 'I bet there was brilliant medicine there.'

'Sure was,' Micky agreed. 'They have a cure for practically everything in five hundred years. Suppose we could always nip forward and get some pills. Fancy a quick trip, Molly?'

This may seem a strange way for someone to talk, as if they came from the future, but in Micky's case, it wasn't. For Micky did, in fact, come from the future.

'I'd love to take you, but Primo and Lucy say I'm not allowed,' Molly replied. 'I told you, they've confiscated my time-travel crystals and my time-stopping crystals. Can you believe it?'

This also may seem like an odd thing to say. But in Molly's case it was entirely apt. For Molly was a time traveller and a time stopper. She was also a world-class hypnotist. The odd thing about Molly, however, was that even though she had all these amazing skills she had never found that she had any talent for schoolwork. So that afternoon she'd stared out of the window,

dreading the new tutor who was coming.

'I'm a bit worried about this teacher,' she confided. 'Bet she hates me. All teachers hate me.' She sighed. 'Always. Mind you,' she added more quietly, wiping the misted-up windowpane with the sleeve of her sweater, 'I usually hate them.'

'Oh, she'll be fine,' said Rocky, raising himself from his slump. 'She won't be anything like the teachers we used to have, Molly. Lucy and Primo *chose* her. Even Forest says she sounds cool.' Forest was the ageing hippy that Molly and Rocky had met in Los Angeles in America, who also now lived in the big house that was Briersville Park.

'Talking of teachers,' said Micky, folding his newspaper into a huge paper dart, 'will you teach me how to hypnotize again, Molly? I'm sure I'll pick it up quickly, since I used to be so good at it.'

Molly nodded. 'Of course. Whenever you want.'

A week or so before, Molly and Micky had been a few hundred years in the future, where Micky had been put on a mind machine. It had sucked all his knowledge of how to hypnotize out of his head.

'Or,' Molly suggested, 'there's the book in the library downstairs. You could use that. That's how I learned to start with. It's called *Hypnotism: An Ancient Art Explained*. Are you still getting nightmares about the mind machine?'

'Not really.' Micky threw the newspaper dart into the fire, where it burst into flames.

‘My head really hurts,’ said Rocky. He pulled a blanket off the sofa and lay down on the carpet in front of the fire beside Petula. Petula dropped the stone that she had been sucking and snuggled up to him.

Molly shut her eyes. *Hypnotism: An Ancient Art Explained*. The title of the old book swam around her head. That book had changed her life. And ever since she’d found it she’d been travelling. Travelling all over the world and through time.

‘You gotta calm down, Molly,’ Forest had said. ‘Gotta like get into the groove of yer *own* time.’

That was when Lucy and Primo had hidden her special chain with the time travel crystals on it.

‘Just so you won’t be tempted,’ Lucy had said. ‘You really should stay in this time for a bit, Molly,’ she had recommended. ‘And try not to use the hypnotism. Live like an ordinary girl. It’ll be good for you.’ She had given Molly a new chain with four animals on it – a black pug, a silver elephant and the two blackbirds. ‘You can wear your pets instead. They’re sweet, aren’t they?’

Molly had felt happy to start with, like a bird glad to be back home safe in its nest. But then something started to happen. Molly found herself longing for excitement and wanting to spread her wings again. You see, for most of her life she’d been cooped up in an orphanage. She loved the freedom of adventure. And so, quite soon, life started to feel a bit boring. She wanted to see more of the world. She wanted more

unpredictability. But her parents and Forest had insisted that a normal time was needed. This was why a teacher had been hired.

Primo, Lucy and Forest said that Molly, Micky, Rocky and Ojas couldn't carry on as though life was one big holiday. They needed to have routine working and playing. Lucy had promised that the tutor who was coming was *very* nice, but Molly was dreading lessons. As far as she knew, lessons were when you watched the clock, or got picked on by a teacher or where you got punished for not knowing the right answer. Micky and Rocky were both natural students, good at learning, and easily able to work. Ojas was keen as mustard. He'd never been to school, ever. 'You don't know how lucky you are, Molly,' he had told her. 'Where I come from some children can't even read. Don't you want to get more and more clever? Don't you want to know things?'

Molly did, but she didn't want a teacher having anything to do with it. All the teachers she'd ever known had been small-minded and mean. 'I'd rather teach myself and learn directly from the world,' she'd said.

Molly was a straight talker, but there was one thing that she had kept secret from everyone at Briersville Park. She sat on the secret like a chicken on an uncomfortable egg.

On her trip to the future, Molly had discovered that she'd developed a new skill. But it wasn't a skill that

she could ever tell her friends and family about. For Molly's newest skill was *mind reading*.

Imagine if your friend could read your mind! You might start to avoid seeing them, for you might worry that they'd see something in your mind that you didn't want them to see. Even though Molly had decided not to use her new-found powers on her family and friends, she knew that, if they knew what she could do, they might start to mistrust her. They might assume that she was probing into their heads to see their thoughts. And so Molly had decided to keep sitting on her spiky egg of a secret.

Of course this didn't stop Molly looking into other people's minds. Maybe Molly would have a little look into the tutor's head when she arrived and see what she was *really* like. To the left of the attic room window Molly saw white lights twinkling far away at the gate lodge. A car began making its way along the dark drive.

With Lucy and Primo stuck in a traffic jam, Molly, Micky and Rocky found themselves being hosts, looking after their guest, their new tutor, Miss Hunroe.

It all began a little strangely for Miss Hunroe. For Todson, the new butler (who preferred to be called plain 'Todson'), had forgotton to put Cornelius Logan away in his stall for the night. Cornelius was Molly's uncle. He too had hypnotic powers, but he had used his hypnotism for bad ends. Molly had been forced to

hypnotize him into thinking he was a lamb, and then 'lock' that hypnotism in, so that he wouldn't revert to his bad ways.

Cornelius was harmless as a lamb and spent the afternoons with the llamas in the front field, eating grass and running about. Todson looked after him, bringing him his meals, and in the evenings putting him to bed. But tonight Cornelius hadn't been put away. Bristling with excitement, Cornelius came trotting into the sitting room where Rocky, Molly and Micky were giving Miss Hunroe a cup of tea.

Before anyone could do anything about it, Cornelius was kicking his legs. He knocked over a table, upset a vase of flowers and leaped excitedly on to a sofa. Then he ran round and round the chair where Miss Hunroe was sitting, finally lying down at her feet like a pet.

'Er, sorry about him,' Molly said. 'He's my, um, uncle. He's not quite right in the head. He was in a special home,' she lied, 'but we brought him back to live here. Don't worry, he won't hurt you.'

'He seems to like you a lot,' said Rocky, wiping his nose.

'Oh, don't worry,' Miss Hunroe replied. 'He's sweet!'

And so Cornelius sat at Miss Hunroe's feet until she went upstairs to change for dinner.

The round-tabled dining room was being used that night. Todson had brought out all the Georgian silver

and polished it. Every place had two knives, three forks and two spoons, with a bird-shaped name-card-holder perched next to each person's water glass. Two tall eight-armed candelabra stood proudly between the shiny peppermills and the salt and mustard pots. The candles were lit and a stack of pinewood burned in the grand fireplace so that the room danced with orange light, and the faces in the old gilt-framed portraits on the walls flickered and moved as if coming to life.

'Well, isn't this lovely!' exclaimed Miss Hunroe as Todson helped her into her chair. 'And something smells delicious.'

'That's a relief,' said Todson, grunting. 'New cook.'

Molly looked around the table. Everyone had made an effort tonight. Forest had got home and was sitting the other side of Miss Hunroe in a bright, lime-coloured jumper and a smart green woollen sarong with pineapples on it. His long dreadlocked grey hair was tied in a plait. And he had a jungly bandanna tied round his forehead. Micky sat beside Molly in a proper tailored turquoise blue shirt. Rocky sat opposite, shivering in a thick navy coat. Molly was wearing a clean T-shirt. Her hair was fairly detangled as she'd spent twenty minutes attacking it with a comb. Todson stood behind each in his smart butler's uniform, holding the soup tureen for everyone to ladle themselves helpings of carrot soup.

'You smell of flowers or somethin',' said Forest, obviously enamoured by the beautiful new tutor. 'Is it like, um, narcissus?'

'No, it's rose,' Miss Hunroe corrected him, smiling a pearl-toothed smile. 'But good try.'

'I'm really sorry,' said Rocky, suddenly pushing his chair back, almost upsetting the soup tureen all over Todson. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Todson. I've got to go to bed, you see. I feel terrible.'

'I've lost my glasses,' said Todson, 'but I can still detect, Master Scarlet, that you look distinctly worse for wear. I'll bring you some hot water bottles and a mug of hot lemon and honey.'

'Thanks, Todson.' Quietly Rocky plodded out of the room.

'It's this terrible flu,' said Miss Hunroe. 'People are falling like flies from it.'

Outside, the wind battered the windowpane. Todson went round the table with a basket of bread. When he came to Forest, he tripped on the edge of the rug. Four pieces of white bread flew past Forest's shoulder into his soup.

'Erm, so sorry, sir, lost my glasses,' muttered Todson. 'I'll get some more bread.'

But Forest was so enchanted by Miss Hunroe that he didn't notice. 'Yes, the flu, man, it's bad,' he agreed. 'It's this weather. All this damp air. Not nice 'n' warm like LA. If only we could control the weather, then we'd have far less of this kinda thing. I mean peace to all creatures, man, but it would be kinda cool to stamp out the flu bug population.'

A small smile played on Miss Hunroe's rose-shaped

red lips, and then they twitched as though she was about to laugh but was controlling herself. She seemed to have a good sense of humour.

Molly couldn't resist. She knew it was nosy and she shouldn't probe, but she wanted to take a little look and see what their new teacher was thinking. No one would know she was doing it. No one would be able to point a finger at Molly and complain. Molly felt like a thief about to steal something, for she knew Miss Hunroe's thoughts were her own. Yet Molly was determined to learn a little more about her new tutor. With butterflies in her stomach from the excitement of it, Molly focused her mind. She silently thought the question to Miss Hunroe, *What are you thinking?*

Immediately one of the hazy bubbles that always appeared when Molly wanted to know someone's thoughts – popped up over Miss Hunroe's head. In it were pictures – various images that merged as Miss Hunroe's mind wandered and flitted about. First Forest's soup bowl, full of bread, shimmered into view.

'Yes, it is dreadful,' Miss Hunroe agreed. 'The flu has no mercy. It forces people to bed for days and days. No mercy.' Then she laughed. 'And I'd love to be able to control the weather too. What a charming idea!' Above her head the bubble filled with a moving picture of Miss Hunroe standing on a hilltop with tall, teardrop-shaped stones all about her. She had a baton in her hand and above her the sky flashed with lightning as she

conducted the weather. 'It would be fun, don't you think, Molly?'

'Er, y-yes,' Molly stammered, feeling as if she'd been caught looking through a keyhole. She let the bubble above Miss Hunroe's head pop. 'Yes, um, snow and blizzards one moment, hot sun the next.' Molly nodded with a smile. 'And it would be nice to make it rain in countries where they have droughts.'

Miss Hunroe leaned towards the table and sipped her soup elegantly from her spoon.

Opposite her Forest slurped. 'Man, this soup is very, er, bready! Must be a new recipe.'

And so the meal went on, a little stilted as everyone was on best behaviour with the stranger in the house, but Miss Hunroe was good natured, and, as the minutes ticked by, the ice melted.

'So what are your plans for our education?' Micky asked as Miss Hunroe passed the peas to Forest. 'I'm very good at physics,' he added, matter-of-factly. 'Well, I'm good at *all* sciences really. My knowledge is *more* than up to date.' Micky paused as he saw Forest give him a raised eyebrow. Micky had been told that he was forbidden to let Miss Hunroe know that he was from the future. 'But,' Micky went on, 'my knowledge about the twentieth century and its history is full of holes. I would like to know more about this time.'

'Gosh! You sound like an alien who has just arrived from another planet!' Miss Hunroe observed.

'I've always been completely useless at school stuff,' Molly interjected, feeling that she ought to get things straight from the start.

Miss Hunroe frowned.

Molly crossed her arms and looked down at her plate of chicken, potatoes and peas. 'Sorry. But that's the way I am. I thought you should know.' She looked up at Miss Hunroe, who was smiling at her. And her smile was so nice that Molly found herself promising, 'I will try, though.'

Miss Hunroe put her knife and fork down. 'Well, I do have a grand plan,' she began. 'And it begins with a gentle entrance to the classroom. I have spoken to your parents and they are both agreed that an educational trip to London would be a lovely way to start the school term. And so, tomorrow morning, we are going to London. We will come back the next day and we are going to pack a *lot* in. The Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, art galleries. What do you think of that?'

Molly and Micky nodded, amazed.

'I'm afraid dogs aren't allowed in museums so your Petula will have to stay behind, but it looks like Rocky is ill so they can have each other for company.'

'I'm sure Petula would prefer to be here,' Molly suggested, reaching down and massaging Petula's firm neck.

I'd love to go,' said Micky.

'Sounds like a brilliant idea,' Molly said, really

relieved that Miss Hunroe wasn't like the other old-trout-like teachers that she'd known.

'Well, that's settled, then,' said Miss Hunroe. 'Pack your bags tonight. Your parents will let Ojas know to pack his. We will be staying in a nice place, by the way, but the location of that is going to remain a secret.' She winked conspiratorially.

'It sounds real cool, Miss Hunroe,' Forest remarked, stroking one of his dreadlocks. 'Wish I was coming too.'

'You're most welcome to,' said Miss Hunroe.

'Maybe you should come,' suggested Molly.

'Yeah,' agreed Forest, 'the bright lights of Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London. I've heard the Queen throws groovy late-night parties!'

'Oh yeah,' said Molly. 'Forest, the Queen has *garden* parties, daytime parties with cucumber sandwiches and scones and cream and smart guests with fancy hats – not late-night parties.'

'Hey, Mol, don't tread on my daydreams!'

'OK, Forest,' Molly said, smiling. 'If you say so – the Queen is a funky dude.'

'Well, it would be great,' said Forest, 'but I have a feelin' Miss Hunroe here needs to size you guys up. Besides, I've gotta do some big time yoga tomorra.'

'Perhaps tonight, if there is time, we shall have a little music,' Miss Hunroe said, pulling a gold coin from her pocket and eyeing the piano that she could see in the drawing room next door.

When everyone heard Todson trip up the front stairs and heard a tray with breakable things on it smashing to the floor, Miss Hunroe made a 'goodness gracious me' face. 'Do you think he's all right?' She pushed back her chair and went to see.

'Oh, my dear!' Molly, Micky and Forest heard her exclaim as she helped Todson up.

'Don't worry about me,' came Todson's reply. 'I'm always falling over.'

'She's a nice lady, ain't she?' said Forest. 'Cool. Wish I'd had a teacher like her when I was a kid.'

Todson tripped up twice more, once over Petula when he was carrying a big fruit jelly. It nearly nearly shot off the plate. The other time he tripped carrying the cream, so that it splattered out of its jug and actually put out a candle.

'Bravo!' Miss Hunroe laughed.

Molly and Micky went to bed, leaving Miss Hunroe and Forest by the grand piano. As they went upstairs, they heard Forest suggest, 'Hey, Miss Hunroe, would ya like to hear a new song I wrote? It's all about the planet.' Chords hit the air, and then Forest's song began.

'Oh, everyday folks, where ya going?
If your eggs had no yolks, would you be singing?
The bees they are dying, the deserts are frying,
And you keep on wasting an' driving an' buying . . .'

His words floated up the stairs, following Molly and Rocky to their rooms. Fifteen minutes later, the music changed style. Evidently Miss Hunroe was a skilled pianist. She played beautifully. Though Molly only heard parts of the piece that Miss Hunroe was playing, the sweetness of the music lulled her to sleep.

The next day the sun had broken through the rain clouds. However, the atmosphere in Briersville Park had grown heavy. In the night, Ojas, Lucy and Primo had arrived back but, after a sleep, they and Forest had *all* caught the flu. Todson had taken them morning tea in their bedrooms and found them very sick indeed. Only Micky, Molly and Miss Hunroe had escaped. So, as the others slept in, Molly, Micky and Miss Hunroe gathered in the kitchen for breakfast.

'It's such a pity that Ojas and Rocky can't come,' said Miss Hunroe, leaning against the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee in her hand. 'But there will be other trips. And lovely Todson is here to look after everybody. So we don't need to worry about them in that respect.'

'What if we came down with it while we're in London?' Micky asked, glancing up from a maths puzzle in the day's newspaper.

'Well, then you come straight home.'

'Miss Hunroe's right,' Molly agreed, biting into her ketchup sandwich. Splodges of red shlop oozed out and fell on to her lap. She took a slug of concentrated

orange squash from her glass. (Ketchup sandwiches were Molly's favourite food whilst concentrated orange squash was her favourite drink.) 'This place is crawling with flu germs. We're probably better off going to London.'

Before they left, Molly and Micky dipped their heads into different bedrooms to say goodbye. Molly found Petula, who was dozing in her basket in the pantry, and kissed her velvety nose.

'We won't be gone for long, Petula. I'll bring you back something nice.' She joined Micky in the hall.

'It's like the plague,' Molly observed as they walked down the nine white steps outside the front door. 'Let's buy everyone a get-better present in London.'

They crossed the circular white gravel drive, passing a topiary bush in the shape of an eagle. Miss Hunroe was already inside her green sports car, revving the engine.

'Nice car, Miss Hunroe,' Micky commented. 'A classic Porche, isn't it?'

'Yes, well, we all have our weaknesses,' Miss Hunroe replied, her rose perfume filling the cold morning air as she opened the car window. 'I'm afraid it's a bit small, though. It's only really designed for two people. One of you will have a tight ride in the back.' She held out her coin. 'Toss?'

Molly took the coin. It was heavy – solid gold, Molly suspected. And it wasn't like a normal money coin. It was plain, except for the picture of a musical note

embossed on one side. It fitted snugly into her palm and felt really nice to hold.

Molly lost the toss and so climbed into the back. In a minute or two they were motoring up the drive past the llama fields where the animal-shaped bushes stood dotted about like leafy zoo creatures. Ahead of them the morning sky smouldered with pink light.

Miss Hunroe reached out to the dashboard. 'Let's see what the weather's going to be like today,' she said. With the flick of a switch, the car's radio was on.

'*. . . the skies should be fairly clear over all the country*,' a weather man was saying, '*though there are blustery winds and cloud forms building near London. Quite a bit of rain may be on the way. We recommend . . .*'

'Damn!' Miss Hunroe snapped the radio off. 'How irritating. I'd wanted it to be perfect weather today. Someone's interfering with it. Ha.'