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Opening extract from

Molly Moon, Micky Minus and the Mind Machine

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Chapter One



It was a cold February evening and storm clouds were gathering. Drawn like grey curtains over the moon, they made the night sky even darker. And high up, forty thousand feet above the fields of the countryside, violent gale-force winds began to circle and play. Billions of raindrops plumped the blackening clouds, preparing to fall.

Far below, trees were tousled by the thickening wind that whistled through their branches. And in a grand country house called Briersville Park, lights twinkled at an upstairs window.

Molly Moon was sitting with her best friend, Rocky, on a Persian carpet in the TV room. Comfortable and leaning against red beanbags, they ignored the wind that was battering the windowpanes. Gusts sent down the chimney disturbed the flames of the wood burning in

the hearth, but they didn't mind at all, for they were feeling cosy and warm. In their laps were brown Chinese-takeaway boxes with the remains of a meal of rice and won ton, and in front of them was the television, switched on.

'Ballroom dancing,' Rocky said, tapping the TV controls and burping, 'a history programme, or gardening, or . . . or him?' As he spoke the screen changed channels, ending up with a suited man hosting a magic show.

'After the break,' the magician was saying, 'I will blow your minds, by reading your minds and *someone* from the audience here will be my . . . hmmm . . . victim!' The studio audience laughed. The showman winked at the camera. 'So see you later.' And at once the adverts started.

'Looks good to me,' Molly said. She stretched down to the black pug who lay quivering by her leg and scrunched its velvety ears. 'Fancy some dumplings, Petula? Come on, don't be scared of the storm. We're all snug and safe in here.' As Molly finished, a particularly aggressive gust banged at the window. Petula dived under Molly's legs. After a second or two the rattling subsided, and Petula looked up. On the television a very sleek pedigree Labrador dressed in a black dinner jacket and bow tie was eating his supper. Petula didn't understand about advertising. She didn't understand that this dog on the screen was there to persuade any dog owners watching to buy CHAMP to feed their pets. It looked

like the Labrador was simply showing off, and that was funny, she thought.

Feeling better, Petula put her head in her paws and glanced fondly at her two human friends. Rocky with his black skin and beautiful eyes was definitely the most pedigree-looking of the two. Molly was more of a mongrel creature. She was skinny with scraggy brown hair and closely set green eyes and a potato-shaped nose. The two of them had always been that way, right from when they lived in the orphanage together when they were little. Whatever Molly wore, she never looked well groomed. To someone who didn't know her, Petula pondered, she really did look a most *un*remarkable person, which shows how deceiving looks can be. For the truth was, Molly Moon was the complete opposite.

Over the last year or so, Petula had witnessed massive changes in Molly. Only a short while ago, Molly, she knew, had thought of herself as useless. Molly hadn't been full of confidence like, for instance, a dog that could fetch the newspaper. But then Molly had found a book on hypnotism. Petula raised her hairy eyebrows as she thought of that amazing book. It had helped Molly reinvent herself. Molly had been like a caterpillar that had turned into a butterfly. Not a beautiful butterfly, but she had certainly grown wings. For now she was a brilliant *hypnotist*, a *time stopper* and a *time traveller*. And Petula had had first-paw experience of Molly doing all these things. She sighed and scratched at a tickle in her ear as

she thought of what they had been through together. It had certainly been unusual.

Petula herself had once hypnotized some mice, and another time, using a time crystal, she had actually made time stand still. But that had been a fluke. Even Rocky could hypnotize using his voice, Petula knew. But he wasn't a *genius* at hypnotism like Molly. Petula stood up and dipped her nose into the cardboard box to nibble at a dumpling and three mooing cows flew across the TV screen.

Rocky was now singing along to the advert jingle.

'Choc – o – *late*!' he sang, with the xylophone music and the woman's voice on the television accompanying him.

'*Choc – o – LATE!*
Every day is a chocolate DATE!'

Molly reached her hand into the YONG takeaway bag. As she'd hoped, there were two small parcels in there, wrapped in crisp red paper. 'Fortune Cookie', read the black inked letters across the front of them.

'Here,' Molly said, tossing one into Rocky's lap, and opening her own. Inside the packet was a brown sugary biscuit. Molly bit into it and, as she did, examined the fortune written on a strip of white paper that had fallen on to the floor.

'What does it say?' Rocky asked.

'It says,' Molly replied, '"The leaf that clings to the branch will block new buds."'

'Hmmm. Mine says, "Travel and change of place impart new vigour to the mind."'

'Who writes these things?' Molly wondered as she munched.

'*Well, that is the question*,' said Rocky, in a strange eerie voice, pretending to be mysterious. '*Who, indeed, writes our fortunes in the book of time?*'

Molly laughed. Then an advert on the television shattered her calm. A baby in a nappy was crawling through a jungle. He was dressed in a camouflage commando outfit. He crawled on determinedly, unaware that he'd narrowly escaped the jaws of a tiger. Intent on his baby mission he crawled through the undergrowth, past an angry hippopotamus, under a venomous snake and over a tarantula. Finally the baby arrived in the land of babies – a safe place where the other babies were glad to see him. There, a deep voice boomed: 'USE PODGEUMS NAPPIES! Put your baby first – give him the support he needs!'

Rocky found it really funny. 'I love that advert,' he chuckled.

But Molly felt sick. The gurgling commando baby had reminded her of another baby. The one she'd been born with – her own twin brother whom she had *never met*. She'd only found out about him two weeks ago. As the baby on the screen clapped his hands together, a feeling of peculiar longing rose up in Molly. Finding out that

she had a brother had been like discovering a secret door in a house that led to a different country. She half wished that the door wasn't there, frightened to have to pluck up the courage to step through it, while the other part of her longed to fling it open and discover this place so near and yet so unknown.

Was her twin brother alive? If so, where was he? And what was he like? What was his name? He had been stolen from their mother just as Molly had been when she was a baby. But who had taken him? Had he been put in a cardboard box on a doorstep of an orphanage like Hardwick House as Molly had been? Had the box been a Moon's Marshmallow box? Or had he grown up with a family? And wherever he was, did he know that Lucy Logan and Primo Cell were his *real* parents? Did he know that Lucy and Primo had been hypnotized for eleven years by Cornelius Logan, Lucy's *own* brother? Perhaps he even knew that Molly had freed them both with her hypnotism. Did he know about Molly?

As these questions jangled loudly through Molly's head, she caught them and, one by one, tried to put them into a box in her mind where she couldn't hear them shouting any more.

She turned her thoughts back to the TV and hoped that the show would distract her.

Then there were steps in the passage outside and the door opened.

'What are you watching?' asked Primo as he and Lucy sat on the sofa. Their long-haired hippy friend, Forest,

who had come in too, sat down on the floor cross-legged.

'It's a magic show,' said Molly. 'I expect this is the last ad.'

'Big storm brewing outside, isn't there?' Lucy said, glancing at the window.

'Seems to me it's already brewed,' Forest replied, as the wind buffeted the windowpane again.

Then Rocky turned up the volume and all conversation stopped. Applause pattered out from the television.

'Welcome back!' laughed the showman on the screen. A large transparent cube that had been wheeled on to the stage now stood beside him. It was filled with tiny coloured balls that whizzed about inside it. 'The time has come for me to find an assistant,' he declared. 'Look at these balls! Each has a number of an audience seat on it! Spotlights, please!' At once a bright beam shone out over the audience, dancing across rows of excited people. The showman clapped his hands and one of the balls shot out of a see-through pipe into a metal tray.

'M22!' The spotlight flittered across the seats, coming swiftly to rest on a plump woman with pigtails. She opened her eyes wide with alarm when she saw that she had been chosen. 'What are you waiting for?' the showman cried. 'Come on down!'

Uncertainly, the lady lifted her tubby body out of her chair, smoothed her red polka-dot dress and, her face twitching with a nervous smile, picked her way down

the central studio steps to the stage. The showman welcomed her and shook her hand.

'Hello, hello. Don't be anxious. What's your name?'

'Irene Brody,' the woman replied, starting to giggle.

'Well, Irene, are you ready to relax, and help me read your mind?'

'I . . . I . . . suppose so.' Irene tittered. 'I've never been chosen from an audience before. It makes me feel a bit giddy.'

'Well, don't you faint on us. Just sit yourself down on this chair.' A black velvet chair was pushed towards her and she settled into it. The lights dimmed. 'Now relax Irene.'

'Sounds like he's about to hypnotize her,' said Lucy, narrowing her blue eyes.

'Irene, assure the audience that we have never met before!' the showman demanded.

'That's true,' said Irene.

'Whom did you come here with today?'

'With my husband.'

The spotlight searched through the audience for Irene's empty seat and found her blushing husband.

'Mr Brody, I presume,' said the magician. The embarrassed man nodded. 'Audience,' said the showman, 'just like everyone here, Irene Brody and her husband are strangers to me. Just like you, they bought their tickets and turned up. Irene's number has been picked out at random.' He paused for dramatic affect. 'Now I am going to read her mind. Irene will write down something

she is going to think about, and I will *read* her thoughts. When the time is right, I will tell you all. Silence, please.'

A lady in a blue-feathered gown passed Irene a pen and a pad of paper. Irene, with her tongue darting tensely from the side of her mouth, began to scribble something down.

Another gust of wind blew down the chimney. The picture on the TV flickered. Rocky threw a sock at it.

'This is rigged,' he said. 'Irene's an actress.'

'I think you're right there,' said Forest.

'Hmmm,' agreed Molly. 'But what if that show guy knows how to stop time? Think about it – he could just stop time, go over and read her piece of paper, then go back to where he was standing and start time again. That would look like he'd just read her thoughts.'

Rocky pressed pause on the TV controls to illustrate Molly's point.

'Yeah, like this,' he agreed. The screen froze with the performer smiling and Irene holding her piece of paper in the air. 'Except that you have to imagine that the magician guy is just nipping over now to read little old Irene's bit of paper. What a cheat!'

'Do you think he's a time stopper?' Primo asked. 'If he's a hypnotist who can stop time, he could be a time traveller too. But do you think a time traveller would waste his time being a showman? Hmm? I don't. I think time travellers have far more important things to do.' Rocky released the pause button and the show continued.