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Molly Moon Stops the World

Georgia Byng



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the World

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“Rocky. Rocky, listen.” Molly grabbed his arm and pulled. “Something stranger than anything has just happened to me.”

“What?” asked Rocky, floating on his back.

“Well,” Molly faltered, in a scarcely contained whisper, “I think ... oh, this is going to sound like I’ve gone crazy ...”

“What? Tell me.”

“I think I just ... I think I made ...” Molly hesitated.

“Made what?”

“I think I just made the world stand still. I think I stopped time!”

Georgia Byng

Molly
Moon

Stops the World

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To Tiger,
for being such a
brilliant ray of sunshine

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About the Publisher

Davina Nuttel sat in the back of her chauffeur-driven limousine, reading about herself in a celebrity magazine. Her chubby face, surrounded by posters of all the films and shows she'd already starred in, smiled out from the page.

"*Child superstar Davina Nuttel,*" she read, "*is back on Broadway in the hit show Stars on Mars. After surprise newcomer Molly Moon quit the part and left New York, Miss Nuttel was the obvious choice for the lead.*" Davina fumed. She was sick of Molly Moon's name being mentioned in the same sentence as hers. She hated that bug-eyed, skinny nobody.

"Stop at the ice-cream parlor on Madison," she snapped at her driver.

He nodded and negotiated his way across four lanes of noisy New York traffic.

Davina was feeling particularly rattled. She needed a big, sweet ice cream. It had been a bad day at the Broadway theater where she was rehearsing a new *Stars on Mars* song. To begin with, she'd had a sore throat and couldn't hit the high notes. Then had come the horrible incident that had completely unnerved her. Davina angrily scraped her nail down the cream leather upholstery. She didn't often need her parents, but tonight she was glad they would be at home for once.

How dare that weird businessman barge, uninvited, into her dressing room? How he'd gotten past the security guards she didn't know. And what nerve to suppose that she would want to advertise his ugly line of Fashion House clothes. Didn't he know he should talk to her agent?

The creepy Mr. Cell had given Davina the shivers, and she couldn't erase him from her mind. His eyes seemed to have etched themselves behind Davina's, in the way that staring too long at the sun burns its image into a person's vision. Every time Davina shut her own eyes, she saw his two mad eyeballs staring at her.

The car stopped outside her favorite ice-cream parlor. Davina fastened her black mink coat and put on the matching gloves. She stepped out into the cold night and waved condescendingly at her chauffeur. She would walk home. Enjoying the sound of her high-heeled boots on the pavement, she swept into the parlor.

Inside, she ordered the house specialty. It was called the Mondae-Tuesdae-Wednesdae-Thursdae-Fridae-Saturdae Sundae. Determined to banish all thoughts of the strange businessman from her mind, she pulled out her gold-plated fountain pen and began practicing her autograph on a paper napkin. Should she stick to her curly writing or change her style?

When her enormous sundae arrived, she ate it all.

Twenty minutes later, she was walking home, feeling sick. She realized that a cold March evening wasn't really the best time to eat a large, freezing-cold ice cream.

In the distance, her grand apartment building towered over the street. That was odd, Davina thought—normally the outside of it was lit with green lights. Were they broken? The building really did look drab, all dark. She would complain as soon as she saw the doorman. She could see him now, standing by the front door with his taxi-calling light baton.

She crossed the broad avenue. The building entrance was only a hundred yards away—but now it was a dark hundred yards, lit up at only one point, where a streetlamp cast an oval pool of yellow on the pavement. Davina walked toward it. She liked spotlights.

Something white and rectangular lay on the ground under the light—garbage, Davina suspected—another thing to complain about. However, as Davina approached, she saw that the white rectangle wasn't garbage. It was an envelope. And when she got nearer, she saw something very strange. The envelope had *her* name on it.

A fan letter! Davina thought with pleasure.

She took off her glove, picked up the envelope, and pulled out the letter. It read:

Dear Davina,

Sorry about this, but you know too much.

Suddenly a heavy hand grabbed Davina's arm. She looked up to see a familiar face smiling down at her. Davina felt petrified with fear. Her body went winter cold. Her ears suddenly seemed to stop working. She could no longer hear the sounds of New York. It was as if the cabs and traffic, sirens and horns no longer existed. All Davina could hear was her own voice—her screams as she found herself being dragged toward a parked car. She looked beseechingly up at the uniformed doorman in the distance.

“Help! Help me!”

But the doorman did nothing. He stood motionless, looking the other way. And desperate kicking and struggling, Davina found herself being pushed into a Rolls-Royce as unceremoniously as a stray dog might be forced into a pound van. She was driven away in the night.

Molly Moon threw a bumper-size packet of Honey Wheat Pufftas up the supermarket aisle. The box flipped through the air, and the fat cartoon bee on it flew, for the first and last real flight of its life, before it landed with a crunch in the shopping cart.

“Bull’s-eye! Twenty points to me,” Molly said with satisfaction. A shower of Jawdro bubble gums came raining down into the cart from over the shelves of cereals.

“How can Ruby eat so much gum?” a boy’s voice asked from the other shopping aisle. “She’s only five.”

“She sticks her pictures up with it,” said Molly, pushing the metal cart to the canned-fish corner. “How can Roger eat so many sardines? That’s what I want to know. Cold, too, straight from the can. Disgusting. You can’t stick pictures up with sardines.”

“Ten points for those gums and double it, Green Eyes, because I got them in from over the other side.” The husky-voiced boy emerged from behind a giant stack of baked beans. His dark-brown face was framed by a white hat with earflaps. He put a large bottle of orange squash concentrate in the cart.

“Thanks, Rocky,” Molly said. Orange squash concentrate was Molly Moon’s favorite drink. She liked to drink it neat.

She disentangled a pen from behind her ear and messy hair and wrote down their chucking scores in a small worn notebook.

Molly ~~45 100 140 175~~ 210

Rocky ~~40 90 133 183~~ 228

“Okay, wise guy. You win this week. But I’ll be the champ before Easter.”

Then Molly consulted their list. It said:

Happiness House Shopping . . .

Boring Stuff

~~potatoes~~

~~onions~~

~~tomatoes~~

~~parsnips~~

~~lettuce~~

~~eggplants~~

coffee	milk	cream
tea bags	sugar	10 tins sardines
white flour	Honey Wheat	eggs
celery	Pufftas	parakeet food
chicken	oats	dog food
cashews	frozen peas	mouse food
chops	butter	baguettes

~~sausages~~

Exciting Stuff

Qube	potato chips	cheesy biscuits
fizzy drinks	Moon's	orange squash
biscuits	Marshmallows	concentrate
ketchup	Heaven Bars	magazines
sweets	sherbet	

Presents

Jawdrop gums	chocolates	teeth whitener
popcorn	lip gloss	shaving foam
		and razors

Happiness House was the orphanage where Molly and Rocky lived. When Molly Moon was a baby, she'd been left on its doorstep in a Moon's Marshmallows box, which is how she'd gotten her name. Until recently the children's home had been called Hardwick House, and as the name might suggest, it had been an extremely difficult place to live in. But just before Christmas, Molly had been dealt a spectacular, life-changing card. In the library in the nearby town of Briersville, she'd found a faded old leather-bound book, *The Book of Hypnotism*, by Dr. Logan. It had changed Molly's life. After learning the book's secrets and discovering that she possessed incredibly powerful hypnotic skills, Molly had left the orphanage and gone to New York, accompanied by the orphanage pug, Petula. There she'd used hypnotism to get the starring role in a Broadway musical called *Stars on Mars*. Molly had fooled and controlled *hundreds* of people, and she'd made lots of money. But a crook called Professor Nockman had discovered her secret. He had kidnaped Petula and blackmailed Molly into robbing a bank for him.

It had been dreadful, until Rocky had showed up and helped her sort Nockman out. Molly had left New York behind, bringing with her the money that she'd earned and a large diamond that had come her way the day of the bank robbery *and* Professor Nockman. Back at Hardwick House, things began to get better at last. Molly had removed the witchy orphanage mistress, the building had been renamed, and the kind—although slightly batty—widow called Mrs. Trinklebury, who had worked at the orphanage before had come to her permanently. Molly had told her that the money she'd brought back from America was from a rich person called the Benefactor who wanted to help the children's home. Molly had also hypnotized Nockman and brought him with her to be Mrs. Trinklebury's assistant. She was hoping that by working with someone as kind as Mrs. Trinklebury, Nockman would soon

reform and become a genuinely kind person too. So far the experiment was working well.

Molly checked her list. They had about everything now.

All the healthy food—the vegetables and fruit that Mrs. Trinklebury had asked for—lay squashed at the bottom of the cart underneath milk and fizzy drinks. On top were the special items—the presents for the six children from the orphanage who were away.

Gordon Boils and Cynthia Redmon were at an Outward Bound course, where Gordon, wanting to look meaner, had shaved his head. Molly had bought shaving foam and razors for him and chocolates for Cynthia.

Hazel Hackersly and Craig Redmon, Cynthia's twin, were at a ballroom-dancing course, so Molly was sending them lip gloss and teeth whitener.

Jinx and Ruby, the two five-year-olds, were staying at Mrs. Trinklebury's lovely sister's place on the farm. Molly was mailing them a package of popcorn and bubble gum.

Molly scratched her head, hoping she hadn't got lice again. "All that's left now is something for everyone who's still at home. Roger needs his nits ... I mean his nuts."

"Poor Roger. *He's nuts*," said Rocky, lobbing some cashews into the cart. Indeed, Roger Fibbin was. Since Molly had returned, he had grown more and more muddled by the world. He spent most of his time up the orphanage oak tree.

"Mmm," agreed Molly. "Got my ketchup and Mr. Nockman's parakeet food ... got Gemma's sherbet and Gerry's cheesy biscuits. Just need our candy and Mrs. Trinklebury's magazines."

Molly pushed the heavily laden cart down the last aisle toward the front of the store and scooped up a carton of toffees, a bag of candy sticks, some Heaven Bars, and a giant package of Moon's Marshmallows.

Rocky plucked *Celebrity Globe* and *Welcome to My World—At Home with the Stars* from the magazine rack.

KID NUTTEL KIDNAP!, the *Briersville Evening Chronicle* declared in black print, but Rocky didn't look at the newspapers. He and Molly piled their purchases onto the checkout conveyor belt. A pretty young woman with thick hair and gentle hands started tapping out prices on her register. Molly looked at her fresh country face and her nylon apron. She could almost belong to a different species from the people on the front of the glossy magazines that lay in front of her.

OSCAR'S SPECIAL ISSUE, trumpeted the headline on *Celebrity Globe*, beside a close-up photo of a woman with tumbling golden hair and a smile so full of teeth that Molly thought she must have had extra ones put in. Her lips were like shiny pink slugs, and her eyes were like a leopard's. Molly knew her face well. Everyone did.

"*Suky Champagne, Academy Award Nominee, Shows Us Her Shoes*," it said under the picture.

Mrs. Trinklebury would be pleased. Her favorite time of year was when the Academy Awards came around—the time when Hollywood handed out prizes, the Oscars, to the most talented people in the film business. Mrs. T. usually talked of nothing else for weeks.

Welcome to My World had a picture of a man who looked more like a god than a human. His skin was as dark as coal and he wore a Tarzan-like outfit. His long dreadlocks were blowing perfectly in the wind as he stood in the sun on a cliff top by the sea.

“I’d look just like him if you put me in one of those toga things,” said Rocky with a wide smile. “I just need to grow my hair longer.”

“And a few muscles,” said Molly.

“*Hercules Stone Invites Us into His Malibu Villa*,” ran the words beside the star’s glistening stomach.

For a moment, Molly felt a pang of regret. If she’d continued with her starry career in New York, *she* might have been beside the sea in California this week and on the cover of *Welcome to My World*. Her hypnotic talent could have taken her to the very top, but she’d given up her life of fame and wealth to come home and be with her friends and family. Now she was once special in an ordinary way, just like the checkout girl in front of her.

Molly took her change, breathed out happily, and on the way out of the shop tossed all her loose coins into the cardboard cap of the crazy woman who always sat there talking to herself, wrapped in a dirty sleeping bag.

“Thank you, my child,” she said with a snagglytoothed smile.

Molly didn’t like people calling her *their* child, because she was nobody’s child—she was an orphan. But she felt mean thinking this about the sad woman who slept in the supermarket doorway.

“That’s all right,” she said. “Happy New Yea ... erm ... Happy March.”

Mrs. Trinklebury had parked her rusty olivegreen car in the parking lot by the River Brier. Molly and Rocky pushed the cart down the main street, past the butcher's where they often bought Petula tasty scraps to eat, past the camera shop and the baker's. Soon they had loaded the trunk. Rocky set off to return the cart and to pick up some screws from the hardware store.

Molly slid into the passenger seat and pulled her denim jacket around her. She began to pick at some of the foam that was bursting through the white vinyl upholstery and thought about what to do over the rest of the weekend.

She might help Rocky make a go-cart, or go down to the riding stables and ask for a lesson. Perhaps everyone might want to go for a swim at Briersville Pools. None of these ideas really inspired Molly, though, for the truth was that what she really wanted to do, what she'd been dying to do for months, was some hypnotizing. But she couldn't. She'd promised Rocky she wouldn't. She and Rocky had agreed that hypnosis was a dangerous tool that would always land them in trouble. Rocky had also learned from Dr. Logan's book. He could hypnotize people using his voice. Molly hadn't mastered voice hypnosis properly. But her powerful hypnotic eyes were far superior to Rocky's voice.

Hypnotism had changed her life. For the very first time, Molly had known how it felt to be good at something. Molly missed feeling good like this. In fact, she missed it dreadfully. Life just wasn't as exciting without hypnotism. The promise she'd made was driving her crazy.

Another thing had been perplexing Molly since Christmas. Lucy Logan, the person who had made sure that Molly had found and taken *The Book of Hypnotism*, had disappeared. Lucy was the great-granddaughter of the author of the book, and she had worked in the Briersville library. Lucy had hypnotized Molly to find the book in her library and then, after learning a few lessons and having some adventures, to return it to her. Molly thought Lucy was a completely brilliant person—and certainly the most special adult she had ever met. She felt she owed Lucy a big thank-you, and she had been looking forward to making friends with her. But now Lucy Logan had vanished. She'd handed in her notice at the library in January and gone.

The watery March light reflected on the cold surface of the river, where a grubby white duck and drake swam about. Molly watched them, trying to divert her mind from hypnotism and Lucy's disappearance. And then, without meaning to, Molly found herself wondering for the millionth time who her parents were.

This question was like a mosquito that sometimes tried to fly into her life. When the question bit her, Molly couldn't help but itch it.

If she was in a good mood, she would imagine her parents as interesting, fun people who, for some dreadful reason beyond their control, had lost their baby. When she was in a low mood, she saw her parents as two horrible people who had wanted to drown her like an unwanted kitten. But whatever mood she was in, thinking about them was always frustrating. Because however hard she tried to picture them, Molly knew she would never know who

they were.

Molly shut her eyes and tried to calm her babbling mind.

She was very good at doing this, as she'd perfected the art of daydreaming when she was very young. Soon she was breathing peacefully and imagining herself drifting upward like a cloud, out of Mrs. Trinklebury's car and along the course of the River Brier, up into the hills and all the way up to its source in the highest peak. Molly imagined that she was hovering. As she felt the weight of the earth and the ancient quality of the mountains beneath her, she was reminded how huge the world was and how unimportant her worries were compared with it.

Feeling refreshed, she opened her eyes. She took one of the baguettes out of a shopping bag and ripped off its end. Opening a new ketchup bottle, she knocked some sauce onto it. For a few minutes, Molly munched her favorite snack and looked out over the river.

On the far bank there were fenced-off gardens with terraced cottages behind them. One garden was larger than the others. It seemed to have two cottages behind it. Some dense green hedges, clipped into the shapes of sitting birds and animals, had recently sprung up in this garden. On the top of one hedge, a huge bird with a long tail was shaped out of branches and leaves, and beside it was a crouching box-hedge hare with two distinct ears. On the top of a yew bush sat a big dog with large hollow eyes, looking as if he was guarding the house.

The spring sunshine danced over the shiny foliage of the bush dog. As the light bounced off a glossy twig where his mouth might have been, the creature seemed to smile at Molly.

Molly remembered how exciting it had been when she'd first hypnotized Petula last November. She sighed and popped the last piece of ketchuppy bread into her mouth. It was so difficult keeping her promise not to hypnotize. It was like resisting the urge to walk on your hands once you'd learned, or like stamping on the impulse to jump high when you actually had the power to leapfrog a tree. Molly longed to experience again the warm "fusion feeling" that washed through her whenever she let her eyes reach their hypnotic peak.

Now, as the dog's leafy eye twinkled at her, Molly was struck by an idea. She had once promised Rocky not to hypnotize any one. She had never promised not to hypnotize *things*.

The fusion feeling was lovely. It made Molly feel as if a tropical sun flowed in her veins. The voice in her head urged her on.

Go on, give it a try, Molly. It'll warm you up. Hypnotize the bush dog. What are you afraid of? That it'll jump over the river and bite you? Molly stared at the bush. Hypnotize a bush? A bush couldn't be hypnotized.

Exactly, urged her mind. But it will make you *feel* nice.

So, winding down the window, Molly focused in her special way at the topiary dog. She found the faraway feeling inside herself that made everything apart from the dog-shaped bush look blurred. Then she searched for the feeling of bush in herself, and the more she stared at the bush, the more the leaves of the dog seemed to absorb her and the more the sounds of the town grew muffled.

Molly felt naughty. Rocky wouldn't be pleased if he knew she was doing this. She'd have to do it quickly before he got back. She waited for the fusion sensation to slowly rise through

her body. For a moment nothing happened. Then a hint of the feeling began, as if sparks of electricity were traveling up her backbone into her head, to behind her eyes, where they circled and throbbed. Her mind felt slightly fizzy, and tiny zapping noises seemed to pop just inside her ears.

But somehow, something was different. The sensation flaring up in her was not the familiar fusion feeling. As Molly stared at the dog, her eyes pulsing, the sensation seemed to twist and mutate. Instead of being a warm tingling, it turned into an icy-cold prickling under her skin, giving her goose pimples all over. Molly gasped in shock and immediately snapped out of her trance.

A sharp clip, clip, clipping noise from across the river reached her ears, and Molly noticed a pair of steel shears snapping shut under the beak of the big topiary bird. She couldn't see the gardener, but whoever he was, he seemed intent upon keeping his bushes trimmed and tidied. He keen to control the wild growth of the privet-hedge creatures.

In the side mirror, Molly saw fat Mrs. Trinklebury wrapped in her crocheted coat, lugging her bags of wool back toward the car. Molly's hypnotic experiments would have to wait.

As Mrs. Trinklebury approached, Molly saw that she was looking very flustered.

"Just look at this t-terrible news," she declared, dropping a newspaper on Molly's lap.

The paper shouted out its headline.

Child Star Disappears

Underneath, there was a photograph of Davina Nuttel, dressed in an astronaut costume for her role in *Stars on Mars*.

Davina Nuttel missing from outside her Manhattan home.

Mink glove found at scene.

New York police treating the case as abduction.

Mrs. Trinklebury was beside herself with worry. "The poor girl. Her poor p-parents. Can you imagine it, Molly?"

Molly could easily. She'd had firsthand experience of kidnaping, since her very own Petunia had been abducted in New York. But she'd also actually met the famous Davina Nuttel, so the news was extra shocking. Even though Molly hadn't liked Davina much, she felt genuinely concerned for her now.

"That's horrible!" she gulped.

"See, life for the famous isn't all fun," said Mrs. Trinklebury, and tutting like a chaffinch, she plonked a cakey kiss on Molly's forehead.

"I'm p-peckish, aren't you? I hope Mr. N.'s cooking l-lunch. Look, I've got a v-video for you all to watch this afternoon. It's got Gloria Heelheart in it. It's the one she won her Best Actress award for last year. She's marvelous. It'll take our minds off Davina."

As they drove home, Mrs. Trinklebury sang along to the radio, trying to cheer herself up. She was thrilled that the child pop star Billy Bob Bimble was number one with his hit single "Magpie Man."

"Don't let him steal your heart," she trilled along,

"Steal it,

Steel your heart, ooooooooooh,

Don't let him have your heart,

Guard it from the start, ooooooooooh,

Steel your heart,

Magpie man, ooooooh,

Wants the sun and the stars and you, oooooh,

Magpie man."

Twenty minutes later they arrived at Happiness House. The front of the building was crisscrossed with scaffolding poles. Half of the building was a pristine white, while the other half was still its old, gray, flaky self.

Petula shot out the front door like a black furry missile. She jumped onto Molly's lap, wagging her curly, stumpy tail, and dropped a present of a stone. Then she turned around, raced back across the gravel, and came out of the house with a letter between her teeth.

"Thank you, Petula," said Molly, taking the soggy envelope and peering at it.

Molly's name had been printed in neat letters in green ink, but they had smudged. And the address had been licked off. Obviously Petula had been looking after the envelope for a while.

"Help me with these bags, could you, Molly?" asked Rocky. "They're so heavy, they're cutting into my fingers."

Molly put the envelope into her pocket and took a bag from him. That was why she didn't read the letter until later.

All her life, Molly's home had been a dump. But recently the dump had been given a facelift. Now Happiness House was completely different inside. For instance, the oak-paneled sitting room, which for so long had been a drafty assembly hall, had new rug on the floor and pictures on the walls. Comfy armchairs and sofas and tables with books and them filled it. A log fire that was always lit in the daytime kept it warm. It smelled of beeswax polish, and today it looked very pretty, with pink apple blossoms in vases, taken from the wild orchard just outside Hardwick village. At one end stood a Ping-Pong table and at the other a trampoline.

After Molly, Rocky, and Mrs. Trinklebury had put away the groceries, it was time for lunch. Mr. Nockman stood in the dining room behind the food counter, with the steam from hot vegetables, sausages, and potatoes wafting up into his face. He looked ten times better than he had when Molly first knew him. His face was much slimmer, with visible cheekbones, and it had a healthy, ruddy complexion. His eyes had whites that were *white*—not yellow and bloodshot—and his bald pate was shiny and clean.

Today he was wearing a pair of baggy gray flannel trousers and a blue zip-up cardigan with a thick red stripe down the back of it. From his shoulder, his favorite parakeet, Chickie Tikka, whistled merrily, occasionally hopping sideways to give him a friendly peck on the ear. All in all, the new, retrained Nockman was happier than he had ever been in his life.

He put three perfectly cooked sausages that he had been saving onto Mrs. Trinklebury's plate.

"Would you like beans, my dear?" he asked her in his strange German accent—actually an accent that Molly had hypnotized him to have.

"Oh, thank you, Simon," she said as she folded a napkin for him into the shape of a bird.

After lunch, everyone crowded into the small TV room. Mrs. Trinklebury sat in the armchair and everyone else found a beanbag or a slice of floor to sit on.

Nockman shook the old video machine to get it working, and Mrs. Trinklebury's film, *The Sighing Summer*, began.

Apart from an interval when three of Gerry's mice escaped from his shirt, everyone was glued to the film for two hours. As the final scene played itself out, with Gloria Heelhead throwing herself off a cliff into the sea, Mrs. Trinklebury wept and Molly reached into her pocket to find her some tissues.

Rediscovering the letter Petula had brought her, Molly slipped out of the room to read it. Petula followed her. They climbed to the top of the stairs, where they both sat down.

Molly ripped open the envelope. Inside was a piece of paper, slightly chewed, with the address:

Underneath, in green ink, was a message that made Molly's heart flutter with excitement and at the same time filled her with relief.

Friday

Dear Molly,

Sorry not to be in touch before now, but I've been in the hospital, as I had an accident. Don't worry, I'm all right, although for a while it was touch and go. I'm back home and would like to see you. I'll tell you all my news, but more importantly, I'm longing to hear about your adventures with hypnotism.

Also, there is something rather important that I would like you to do.

Why don't you come for tea on Sunday at four?

I'll see you if I see you.... Hope I do.... Perfectly punctually?!

Best wishes,

Lucy Logan

"Wow—how about that, Petula?" Molly said, giving her a squeeze. She was really pleased. At last she was in touch with Lucy Logan again. Molly couldn't wait to see her. She wondered what had made her hand in her notice at the library, and she still thought it odd that Lucy hadn't called her, but perhaps she'd been in the hospital all this time.

Molly remembered how she had drifted like a snowflake into the library in the dead of the night on Christmas Eve to return the mysterious *Book of Hypnotism* as Lucy had hypnotized her to. Lucy had woken her from her hypnotic instruction with the words *perfectly punctually*. Molly smiled as she read the same words in Lucy's letter.

Molly wondered what Lucy could want her to do. She wanted to thank Lucy, to tell her about New York, and to talk hypnotism with her. There was one other big reason too.

Keeping her promise not to hypnotize anyone really was driving Molly up the wall. It wasn't only frustrating. The thought of never being able to use her powers again was beginning to make Molly feel bereaved, as if something in her had died.

Lucy had told Molly that she used hypnotism to do good things for other people. Molly and Rocky had done their own sort of good hypnotism before they'd left New York. They'd made a hypnotic TV commercial called "Check Out the Kids in Your Neighborhood." They thought it would make people who watched it care more about the children around them. The TV company had promised to show it a lot, and so it had probably done some good. Molly wanted to ask Lucy to tell Rocky that generous, unselfish hypnotism was okay. Then he might agree to break the hypnotizing ban that they'd made. She'd need to explain this all to Lucy without Rocky being there.

For this reason, Molly decided to go to 14 Water Meadows Road alone.

Sunday morning was so bright and shiny that the glossy-leaved trees outside Molly's window looked wet. Molly breathed in the frosty air and felt really thrilled. Today she was going to Lucy Logan's for tea.

As two thrushes landed on a prickly, red-berried shrub and began pecking at its fruit, Molly noticed Roger Fibbin's skinny form scrabbling about in the dead leaves and broken twigs under the oak tree. With his beaky nose and his jerky movements, he looked like a bird pecking around for grubs. He was probably looking for a magical doorway to another world.

Roger had gone a bit mad. He seemed to live in a scary fantasyland where the leaves and stones whispered to him. He roamed the town listening for secret messages, and he made folded-paper darts that had writing inside them. They said things like *Send help quick! Aliens have eaten my brain!* and *Watch out! The brain centipedes are here!* and *Don't judge your body by its skin.*

These he threw around Briersville—through people's mailboxes, over garden walls, into cars and shops. Once, he managed to slip in through the exit door of the cinema and throw fifty of his darts into the audience.

Molly wondered whether the peculiar habit he'd developed—of eating from the Briersville garbage cans—had given him some sort of brain infection, but the doctor said that all he needed was rest, good food, and kindness.

Molly undid the window and called out, "Roger, are you all right?"

Roger looked up nervously and then glanced over his shoulder to check that no one was listening. "Yes, they can't get me today."

"Do you want to go for a bike ride?"

"Can't, Molly. Too much to do. Maybe another day."

"Okay, you just let me know when. It would be good fun."

She shut the window and wondered whether Roger would ever get better.

The morning tipped into the afternoon.

It was a lovely, fresh, downhill bike ride into Briersville. The roadside was bursting with young green shoots, crocuses and daffodils, and the sky was blue. Blossoming trees nodded to the clear March breeze. Other trees were still cold and bare, but the tips of their branches were tinged with dark pink, where new leaves were nearly ready to break out.

Molly cycled past Hardwick village, down the winding road between fields full of cows, past Briersville Junior School, and into the town. Since it was Sunday, it was very quiet. The Guildhall, with its green pepperpot roof, was closed, and the broad street was deserted.

Water Meadows Road was a narrow, cobbled street, across the bridge and down a turn to the right. Number fourteen was a bay-windowed cottage in a row of very old houses. Molly leaned her bicycle against its front wall and, grasping the lion's-paw knocker on the door,

rapped twice. Unzipping her jacket, she looked down at her T-shirt and noticed some gravy that she'd spilled on it at lunchtime. She was trying to suck this off when the door slowly opened. Molly let the shirt drop from her mouth.

In front of her was a shocking sight: a figure from a horror film, yet wearing the neat pleated skirt, the white collared shirt, and the plain blue cardigan of Lucy Logan. Its entire head was wrapped in white bandages, except for a patch of hair that was arranged in an elegant bun. Molly could see Lucy Logan's familiar blue eyes and her mouth, but the rest of her face was covered with some sort of dressing.

Lucy stood leaning on crutches. Her left foot was in a slipper, but the whole of her right leg was in plaster, and her toes, with pink nail polish on them, popped out of the end of the cast.

Molly's first reaction was to gawp, and for a moment she stood transfixed.

"Oh, Molly, I'm sorry. Of course, this must be an awful shock for you."

Molly barely recognized Lucy's voice, but she nodded and managed to say, "Are you all right? What happened?"

Lucy leaned out into the street and nervously looked left and right. Then she pulled Molly inside.

"I'll tell you all about it, but come in quick—my toes are getting cold."

Molly found herself standing in a small hall. On a semicircular cherry-wood table, a mantel clock ticked quietly. Opposite it, a tiny hanging grandmother clock swung a pendulum. A Lucy took Molly's jacket and put it over the back of a chair, Molly breathed in a smell of toast and wondered why her host had just behaved so warily.

"Come into the warmth," Lucy said, maneuvering awkwardly on her crutches and leading Molly past a narrow staircase into a meticulously tidy kitchen. It was so immaculate that Molly looked down at her gravy stain and wished she'd changed her top.

"Sit down," Lucy said kindly, inviting Molly to sit on a crescent-shaped bench in the bay window. "Do you drink tea?"

"Er, hot orange squash if you've got it," said Molly, not quite daring to ask for concentrated orange squash, which she would have preferred. She didn't want Lucy to think she was weird.

"Fine," said Lucy, and she put a kettle on to boil.

Molly sat on the bench with her hands wedged between her knees, trying not to stare at Lucy's bandages. What sort of horrible accident had she had? Molly didn't know what to say and the palms of her hands began to sweat, as they always did whenever she was nervous. Lucy broke the silence.

"Molly, I'm so sorry I haven't been in touch. You must have thought it was peculiar that I didn't call you. But two things happened. First, something very serious took over my life and I couldn't tell anyone about it. And then I had the accident. My car caught fire. My face was badly burned. I still can't eat much—I have to suck soup from a straw and chew on cookies that dissolve in my mouth. My throat was damaged from all the fumes. My voice has been affected, as you can hear. It's probably always going to be husky. The doctors say my face will be scarred for life and my hair will never grow back in places. But"—she gave a lopsided

smile—"I'm lucky to be alive, and now I don't take life for granted."

Molly was shocked into an awkward silence. In the last few months, she had felt annoyed and hurt that Lucy had forgotten her. She had never imagined that something as horrible as this had happened.

"Don't worry about not getting in touch," she said quickly. "I mean, I did wonder where you'd gone, but you know I was busy straightening out the orphanage—the redecorations and things. And it's all thanks to you, Lucy. Everything's much cozier now. Everyone's happier. The School's much better too, because Mrs. Toadley left. Well, er, actually she was fired."

"I heard it was because she went around telling everyone what a dreadful teacher she was," said Lucy.

"Which she was," said Molly, hoping that Lucy wouldn't disapprove of the fact that Molly had hypnotized the bullying Mrs. Toadley into behaving like this. "But I haven't done any more hypnotizing at all since I got off the plane before Christmas," she added. She hoped Lucy would be impressed by this self-restraint, but the librarian gave her a sharp look.

"You've stopped? Why would you stop? Don't you need anything?"

Molly was taken aback. "I—well—I didn't think about that. I just promised Rocky that I wouldn't use it anymore."

"Oh dear." Lucy fell silent. Then she said, "Bring your drink and these cookies. We'll go into the sitting room." She hobbled through another door. Molly followed, and the glory of the room beyond took her attention away from Lucy's bandages.

The room was a shrine to hypnotism. In the center of it was a table that had a circular swirl inlaid in copper. Molly looked at the pattern. It reminded her of a similar swirl that had been painted on a pendulum she'd once owned. The copper design seemed to draw her eyes toward the dot at the table's center. At once she felt relaxed. Immediately she snapped away. "Is that a hypnotic table?"

"It can be," said Lucy.

"I'll have to watch you this time," said Molly, smiling. "I can't believe you hypnotized me so easily last November in the library."

"Well, as I told you, I wanted you to find the book," said Lucy. "Don't worry—I don't need to hypnotize you ever again."

"I'm too alert to be hypnotized anyway," said Molly, following the copper swirl with her finger.

Indeed Molly was. Everything in this room reminded her of the incredible power of hypnotism. Above the mantelpiece, over a cheerful fire, hung a portrait of a bewhiskered Victorian gentleman in a black tailcoat and top hat. From his waistcoat top pocket came a golden chain that was attached to a shiny pocket watch. Molly instantly recognized the man from his picture in *The Book of Hypnotism*.

"Yes, there's the great Dr. Logan himself," said Lucy, settling down in a chair. "All over the room are things that belonged to him that have been passed down through the family. The table, and in the cabinet behind you there's the very pocket watch that he's holding in the portrait. He used it as a pendulum. He went all over America, and that's how he made his

fortune. I've got lots of pictures of him and his traveling hypnotism show. There's his collection of miniature clocks, too. Have a look."

Molly went to the cabinet. Sepia-colored photographs of Victorian people stood in silver frames. In one, Dr. Logan was on a stage, posing theatrically beside a peculiar figure. Lying flat and balanced between a couple of chairs, her head on one and her feet on another, lay a woman. Nothing supported her body. Her long dress had been bunched up, like a tied-up umbrella, so that it didn't drag on the floor, and she was as stiff as a board. Molly knew this was a hypnotism trick called the human plank.

Molly inspected the golden pocket watch and then looked at the tiny carriage clocks. On the wall beside the cabinet were three more clocks: a round one, a castle-shaped one, and a pewter clock. They were all showing the correct time. "I've never seen so many clocks in one home," she said.

"Well you've probably never been in the house of a clock collector," said Lucy. "Clocks remind me that life is short and that I mustn't waste it."

As Molly thought about this, she looked out the sitting-room window. It was then that she noticed that Lucy's garden was the very one where the topiary animals grew. The hare and the dog were very close to the window, making the room darker than it should be.

"Wow! I was looking at your animal bushes yesterday," Molly exclaimed. "Without realizing that they belonged to you. Are they new? I've often looked over the river from the parking lot, and I've never seen them before."

"Yes, they are new. I bought the plants fully grown and clipped them myself."

"I like the dog with the big eyes," said Molly.

Lucy laughed. "It's supposed to be a bush baby. I obviously need to go to topiary classes. She reached for a cookie. "Help yourself, Molly. I shouldn't, really. I've put on so much weight since the accident. I've eaten hundreds of cookies." She shifted uncomfortably in her skirt and undid its zipper a bit. "The bushes are there for a reason," she added. "They're to stop people from looking in."

Lucy suddenly seemed nervous.

"I can't be sure who's watching me at the moment." She paused. "Molly," she said, sounding serious, "I've got an awful lot to tell you today. But first I want to hear all the things that happened to you after you read the book. It's very important that I know."

"Sure," said Molly, curious about Lucy's mysterious business but dying to tell her about her amazing experiences. And so she launched into her story.

"I had an incredible time. In fact the *best* time I've ever had mixed with the *worst* time ..."

Lucy Logan listened intently, but she wasn't as interested as Molly thought she might be. What Lucy Logan was most intent upon was *whom* Molly had hypnotized and *how*. She questioned Molly about exactly how she had hypnotized an audience at the Briersville talent show so that she'd won, then how she'd hypnotized a flight attendant, and how she'd hypnotized the hotel staff in New York, and how she'd won over the whole audience of New Yorkers in the show *Stars on Mars*. She wanted exact details about the methods Molly and Rocky had used when they had robbed Shorings Bank after Nockman had blackmailed them.

Her questions were so thorough, it was almost as if Lucy was testing Molly.

“So,” she said eventually, “you gave all the money and jewels back to the bank. That was extremely honest of you. Not many people would have done that.”

Molly said nothing. Her fingers automatically reached for the diamond that hung around her neck. She decided not to tell Lucy about that for now. She didn’t want Lucy to disapprove of her.

“Lucy,” she said instead, wiping her lips on her sleeve, “what about you? Now it’s your turn to tell me about your hypnotic adventures.”

Lucy’s blue eyes looked at Molly from behind their white frame of bandages, and she said in a serious voice, “Molly, we haven’t got time for my stories now. The special work that made me hand in my notice to the library is very grave. It’s why I didn’t get in touch. I didn’t want you to get involved, because I didn’t want you put in danger. But the time has come for you to know what’s been going on.” Lucy took a deep breath. “You thought you were coming for an entertaining tea, but I have invited you here to ask you to do something very, very important. I’m extremely sorry, but I have no other choice. Time is running out.”

Molly gulped. She didn’t like the way the afternoon was turning out.

Lucy stood up. “Please come with me.”

Molly followed Lucy through a passageway hung with half a dozen more clocks. A flight of stone stairs led to a basement. Lucy hobbled slowly down them.

At the bottom was a door with four locks on it, two combination padlocks and two locks with keys. Molly wondered what could need such protection.

“There are secrets in here,” said Lucy, “that have to be kept hidden. Secrets that will interest you. Come in.”

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