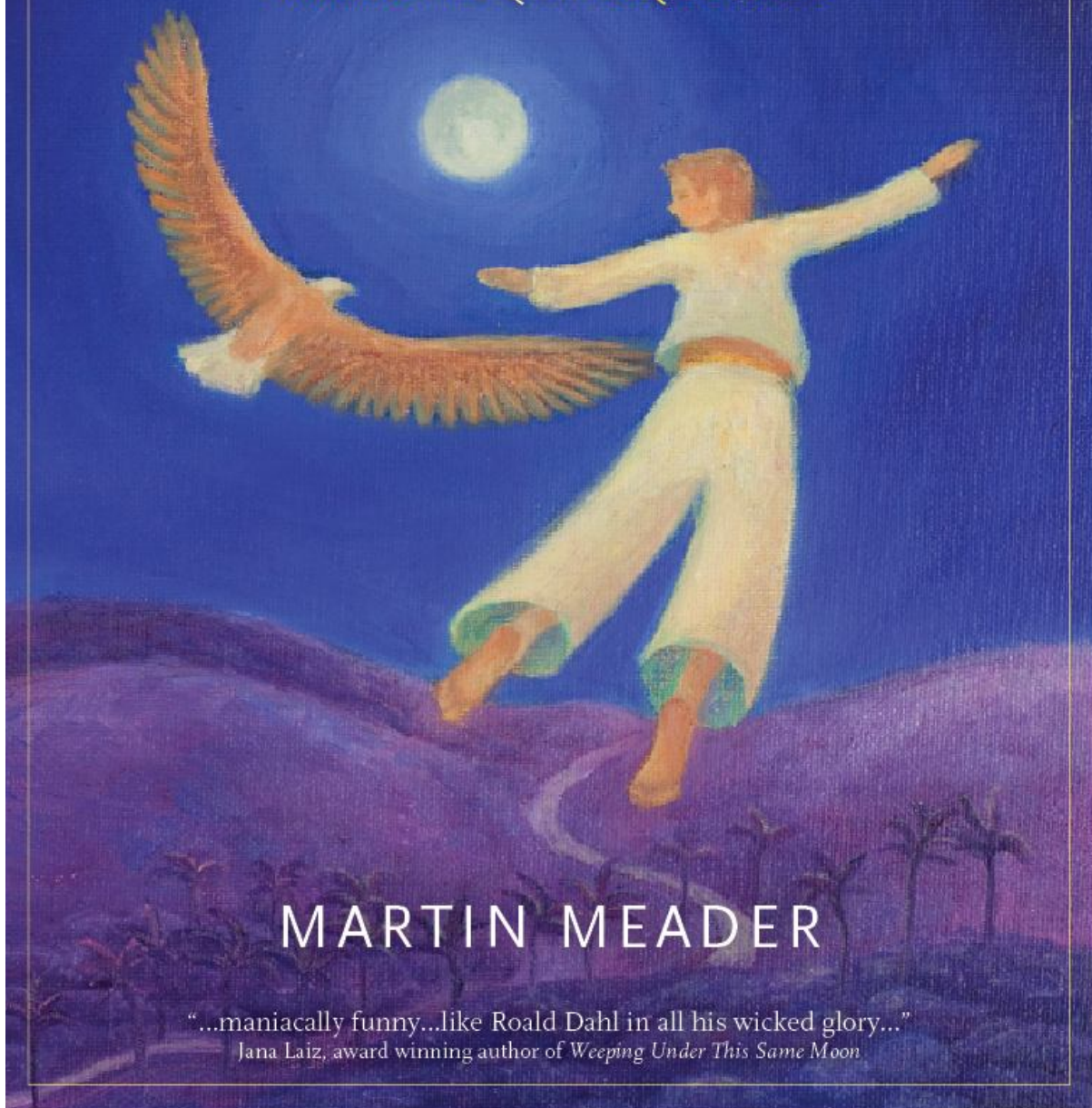


THE ADVENTURES OF
Charlie & Moon

BOOK ONE
FACING THE QUINCEQUONCES



MARTIN MEADER

"...maniacally funny...like Roald Dahl in all his wicked glory..."
Jana Laiz, award winning author of *Weeping Under This Same Moon*

Prologue: A Seed Is Sown

It was an unusually warm night in the shire of Tumblegum. The long, winding, dirt track that led from the two-story, ramshackle farmhouse on top of the hill seemed to lie in waiting. The happy babble of motorbike frogs and clackety crickets filled the star-lit landscape. Christmas was only five days away and the land felt as content as it ever had. So, when a large bank of clouds innocently meandered towards the moon, no one took any notice. Well, not until the moon disappeared completely. Then a cold chill invaded the darkness and everything came to a stop, stood absolutely still. Even the frogs and crickets became silent: frozen in mid-croak, as it were. There was a sudden air of expectancy, as if something strange was about to happen. Then something strange *did* happen.

Stepping across into the hot Tumblegum evening from an otherworldly blizzard, a peculiar-looking gentleman stood on the farm's porch dusting the snowflakes off his heavy greatcoat. Steam rose from his woolen scarf. His sturdy black boots stretched up above his knees and he carried a gnarled, wooden walking stick. Taking off his gloves, he reached deep inside his coat pocket and pulled out a small, shiny golden package.

Waiting on the verandah in the shadows of the night were Cecil and Sylvia Ramsbottom, the owners of the farm. They had been expecting the old gentleman, though they were more than a little shocked to see remnants of snowflakes on his coat, melting in the hot summer night. The man looked at the couple and smiled sadly. Then as if weighing his decision carefully, he passed the golden parcel to Sylvia, gently touching her arm in reassurance.

As one, Cecil and Sylvia spoke, "We will give it to him. You have our word." The traveler replied, "Thank you and good luck. One day he will understand." Turning to leave, the man stopped, his head tilted to one side, as if listening to an unseen voice. Reaching yet deeper into his greatcoat pocket, he pulled out a second, larger parcel, wrapped in shiny silver paper. He handed this to Cecil, who received it graciously, their eyes locking for a long moment. "He will need this too!" said the man. Nodding his head and understanding, Cecil bowed to the old visitor whose smile was now hopeful. The old gentleman turned and made his way down through the blooming garden, breathing deeply the flowers that scented the gravel track leading to a very creaky bus shelter. The couple watched him go, gave each other a knowing look and went back inside the farmhouse.

Once the man reached the bus stop, he sat down and drew in another deep breath of the warm air, filling his lungs with the sweet smell of mother earth. Slowly expelling the air from his weary frame, he glanced uneasily back to the farmhouse and tugged worriedly on the long white beard that grew out of his face like a snowstorm of cottonwool.

Through the quiet of the night came the deep rumble of a large vehicle approaching. The man's ears shot up like a dog. Preceded by the gleam from its very bright headlights, a bus sped around the corner into view. It was the 'No. 9' and right on time. As the bus drew closer, lively South American music could be heard pouring from its windows. Inside the bus, a woman was performing the most rhythmic rumba dance. The moment she saw the man, the woman stopped dancing and, as she did, the bus screeched to a halt in front of him.

Now, if you had looked closely at the bus, you would have noticed the strangest thing: there wasn't a driver. Even more peculiar was the dancing ticket collector. Her name was Doreen Tremblingknees and from head to toe she was dressed in green. Doreen sported an enormous beehive hairdo that towered four hands into the air above her head and was surrounded by little honeybees, all trying to snuggle in for a cozy night's rest. Plumping her notorious hairstyle back into shape and away from her elfish ears after her wild dance, Doreen pushed a lever down at the back of the bus and the door hissed open. Gazing fiercely at the bearded gentleman, she finished chewing on a piece of honeycomb and gave a long squeal.

"Bizz-Buzz, there you are!" she called excitedly. "Is it done?" Bizz-Buzz twitched his ears but said nothing for the moment. Then he slowly looked at her, his enormous watery blue eyes betraying his feelings as he spoke. "What will be, will be, Dor-r-reen," he said, rolling his rrrs in a very gentle way. "It is my business to do my best, and that is all one can do in this buzzed-up situation. It is our only chance and now rests with the boy." Bizz-Buzz shrugged his shoulders and made his way to a seat inside the bus.

"The boy! Is he strong enough? Isn't he too young?" cried Doreen Tremblingknees as she followed him down the bus.

"He bore witness, Doreen. He bore witness. And, it is the king's will," said Bizz-Buzz making himself comfortable in one of the seats. "What's been bizzed cannot be buzzed. There's nothing more we can do but hope and t-r-rust."

Doreen rang the bell and started swaying her body slowly up and down the aisle. This was the signal for the bus, still without any sign of a driver, to crawl away into the darkness.

Through the windows, Doreen could be seen moving her arms like the wind as she danced. And as she did, she sang a haunting medieval lament that wafted through the air:

**The time has come for us to depart
I dance this bus with my broken heart
And put my trust in a spirit unknown
The gift has been given,
A seed has been sown.**

For a while, it sounded as if the whole valley was crying, the song was so sad. But then, the bus rounded the corner and disappeared out of sight, silence falling upon the landscape once again.

Well, almost.

A small feathery creature had been hiding in some bushes near the road, watching the proceedings. Panting and puffing, it dragged itself out from behind its cover. Checking backwards and forwards to make sure that no one was following, it stumbled along the pathway accompanied by an irritating clunking noise coming from a large piece of ugly, rusted chain that was attached to its bloodied right claw. Engraved on one link of the chain, were the initials, **S.W.** with the body of a rattlesnake wound around them. The animal stopped for a moment, touched a claw against one of its wings and then continued towards its goal - the ramshackle farmhouse on top of the hill.

Chapter One: The Gift

Upstairs in the farmhouse, Mrs. Sylvia Ramsbottom was putting the children to bed. It was getting late as Sylvia said goodnight to her daughter Penelope. Thirteen-year old Penelope was what you might call unusual. With a frenzy of red hair, she had an outlandish love of opera and horror movies. She reveled in singing along with famous operatic arias on her iPod. It was said that she had a voice that could strip paint off doors and at this very moment was badly singing *The Queen of the Night* from Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Penelope's other joy in life was numbers and on this night she was, as usual, furiously working at a laptop computer surrounded by a large assortment of math books cleverly stacked, pyramid-style on the floor next to her desk.

Sylvia Ramsbottom said goodnight and closed the door to her daughter's bedroom and headed across the landing towards another door. When she opened this door and peeked inside, it appeared at first sight, as if a tornado had ripped through the room. The room was chaos in motion. The walls were covered with posters of winged dinosaurs and snowboard heroes in mid-flight. Sylvia stepped delicately across the toy-strewn floor. Avoiding scattered bunches of Lego, she made her way to a bed piled high with blankets. Stopping next to a very untidy bedside table, she called out softly.

"Charlie, where are you?"

"Under here, where it's warm and snugly," said a muffled voice that seemed to come from anywhere but the bed. Sylvia Ramsbottom slowly pulled the covers back to reveal a pile of pillows and a beautiful long skateboard inscribed with the word: LUCKY. Without warning, Charlie flew from his perch on the chest of drawers out in front of his mother. He screeched at the top of his voice. Sylvia pretended to jump back in fright – she'd been through this before. Charlie laughed out aloud and so did his mum. He stowed his skateboard under the bed with a clunk and climbed under the covers. His curly, blond head resembled a raggedy mop as it stuck out of his blue and white-striped pajamas. Turning onto his side, Charlie looked up at his mother who had on a weatherproof parka that she always wore around the windswept house. She had the same kind of mopy hair as her son. In fact, the two of them were probably cast from the same mop!

"Well, were you scared?" Charlie asked, as he picked up his clunky MJ9 portable game-player and continued maneuvering a bird-like creature over an invented landscape.

"Of course," said Sylvia leaning her head to one side and smiling at her son. Taking a colored pencil from her parka, she reached up to the endangered species calendar above Charlie's bed. The month of December showed a bald eagle hovering over a city landscape. Sylvia drew a large blue circle around Friday the twenty-first and straightened a crooked framed newspaper article next to the calendar. The article showed a photo of the Ramsbottom family and two very large chickens with the headline reading:

**RAMSBOTTOM'S SAVE THUNDER
EGG CHICKENS FROM EXTINCTION**

"You know, Charlie," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Tomorrow's a very special day but I can't remember why." Charlie continued to play his game, one eye glancing up at his mother.

"For one thing," said Sylvia playfully. "I know it's either the longest or shortest day of the year, depending on which side of the world you live on."

"Mu-u-u-um...give me a break, would you?" moaned Charlie navigating his winged creation over a mountain. Sylvia continued,

"That means that we've only got...let me see now...five more days until...well, would you believe it!"

"Would you be quiet in there?" Penelope sang out operatically from her bedroom. "Some of us are trying to compute in our sleep."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Does she really have to be my sister?"

Sylvia Ramsbottom nodded her head gently and smiled to herself. Taking a deep breath, she finished her sentence.

"...and, it's the last day of school tomorrow," she whispered, pretending excitement. "I can't think of any other reason for it to be a special day. Can you, Charlie?"

Still engrossed in his game, Charlie said, "It's my birthday tomorrow. You know it is."

"Oh, so it is. Well Charlie, this dreamer almost forgot...this," said Sylvia. She put her hand inside her parka and rustled some paper. Charlie sat bolt upright and placed the MJ9 on the bedside table.

"You'll have to close your eyes first," said Sylvia. Charlie quickly put his hands across his face and tried to peek out from behind his fingers but his mother knew him too well. She waited patiently. So Charlie complied by squeezing his eyes tightly shut. From deep inside

her coat, Sylvia pulled out the small rectangular package. She held it in her hands in front of Charlie's face.

"You can open your eyes now."

The package, which was encased in gold wrapping paper, was so shiny that Charlie could see his warped reflection staring back at him like an ugly gargoyle. Sylvia placed the gift very carefully on the night table, next to his game-player.

"Charlie," she said. "This is from a friend called Bizz-Buzz." Charlie squinted, unconcerned with the identity of the giver.

"Bizz-Buzz! Fizz-Fuzz! Who cares? I want to open it now! Is it the latest version MJ9?" said Charlie with all the patience of a hound dog on the scent.

Sylvia rolled her eyes and continued. "Bizz-Buzz gave me strict instructions that it should not be opened until morning. So - promise? Do I have your word?" Charlie could hardly contain himself.

"Cross my heart and hope to...fly?" Charlie mumbled rather cheekily, giving an emphatic nod and raising and flapping his arms above his head. Mrs. Ramsbottom beamed at her son and kissed him on the forehead, leaving two shiny red lipstick marks just above the bridge of his nose. She made her way back across the room and turned around to take one more loving (almost knowing) look at her son.

"Sweet dreams, darling." Then she switched off the light and closed the door.

Outside on the wooden verandah that encircled the farmhouse, the multi-colored lights of a Christmas tree gleamed and flickered in the quiet of the night. A *clinkety-clunk* could be heard down by the gate leading to the house. The small, feathery creature that had finally reached its destination was looking up at a large wooden sign, with an image of four people and two very large chickens, which read:

**THUNDER EGG FARM
HOME OF THE THUNDER EGG CHICKEN
OWNERS: CECIL & SYLVIA RAMSBOTTOM**

At that moment, the moon cleared from behind the clouds and lit up the entire valley. The front door to the farmhouse swung open and Charlie's father, Mr. Cecil Ramsbottom, resplendent in a tartan dressing gown with matching socks and sheep's-wool boots, wandered onto the porch to put out the milk bottles. The fluffy animal quickly dropped down behind a

large bush of purple eggplants. Mr. Ramsbottom completed his nightly ritual, went back inside the farmhouse and closed the door. When all was quiet again, the downy creature switched its gaze to an upstairs bedroom where the lights had recently been turned off - the bedroom that belonged to none other than Charlie Ramsbottom.

Snuggled under his blankets, the light from the MJ9 illuminating the package, Charlie stared at the gift with bated breath. What was he to do? Should he open it or shouldn't he? He was a boy of his word...sometimes. He decided he would resist that particular temptation, at least for the next few minutes. He reluctantly returned to his electronic adventure. Opposite his bed was a huge, double-door, oaken closet. As if a breeze was blowing through the room, the closet doors creaked open like they do in scary movies and the moon's silvery light revealed that Charlie's shirts and trousers were rocking backwards and forwards on their clothes hangers. He looked over at the window but it was closed. Scared, Charlie tried to keep his eyes fixed on the game. He gulped, or tried to but his mouth was as dry as a monkey's armpit. He could feel his heart thumping against his chest. Eerie shadows danced across the bedroom wall. He grabbed a bottle of water and was about to put it to his lips when a voice started to call to him.

"Pick it up. Go on, pick it up," the voice urged hypnotically. With his hair virtually standing on end, Charlie's head spun around. The voice seemed to come from the package.

"Pick it up. Go on, you can do it," called the charmer's voice. It was definitely coming from the package.

Very slowly, Charlie put his MJ9 aside, reached out and put his trembling hands around the gold paper gift and felt it. He held it to his nose and smelled it. He shook it. He even tried to listen to it.

"Cross my heart and hope to...fly? Cross my heart and hope to..." The half-hearted promise that Charlie had made to his mother echoed around in his head. Quickly, he slid the package back onto the table and sighed. Why did he have to wait until morning? It was ridiculous and inconsiderate to leave a present by a boy's bed on the night before his ninth birthday.

"Open it. Don't be weak. Be strong. Come on, open it." The voice drew him in again, so much so that he couldn't stand it any longer. Taking a deep breath, Charlie got out of bed and, putting his ear to the floor, listened for *Talk with the Animals*, the TV program that his parents were undoubtedly watching in the living room below. He knew they would be there

for hours feasting on poached Thunder Eggs, completely engrossed. He crept slowly to the door, pulled it open very carefully and slid across the landing to Penelope's room. Peeking through the keyhole, Charlie could see Penelope, half hidden by algebra books and multiplication tables. Her computer was still aglow with a screensaver of her favorite scary movies. She was talking to herself, stretched out across her bed, fast asleep.

"Twenty-seven multiplied by nine equals two hundred and forty three..." mumbled Penelope. Now she was even being clever in her dreams. "What a waste of space," whispered Charlie to himself and stole back into his room.

With the coast clear, he turned on his bedside lamp and picked up the gift. Very carefully, he peeled back the sticky tape and meticulously undid the golden wrapping to reveal a book! On closer inspection, he saw that it wasn't even a whole book. It was half a book. He couldn't believe it!

"Half a book - what am I supposed to do with half a book?" Charlie grumbled.

The book's cover was encrusted with jeweled edges and a thin, silken band of blue cloth joined by a waxen seal held the book's remaining pages together.

Just as he was about to disgustedly place the book back into its wrapping paper, a silver sparkle danced off the waxen seal. Charlie took a closer look. The seal sparkled again. Now this was a different story!

Placing his fingers around the seal, Charlie tried to break the waxen padlock but it wouldn't budge. He tried again: still no luck. Then, he summoned up all the strength he could muster and with both hands, finally cracked the seal in two. As it snapped, so did the power in the house. Instantly, all the lights went out.

Absolute darkness!

Frantically, Charlie felt for his MJ9 and tried to turn it on but its power had also been mysteriously drained. He then reached into the drawer of his bedside table. His fingers scrabbled about searching for something. Where was it? Ah, there, his flashlight. He turned it on, grabbed the gift, and dived underneath the bedclothes.

Gripping the flashlight with his teeth, Charlie examined the cover of the book but couldn't see any kind of title. Then letters began to magically appear on the surface of the book:

..e ..ok .. r...s

Then more letters.

.he .ook .r.ams

Followed by more.

.he .ook of .reams

As all the letters finally appeared on the cover, Charlie read out loud, “*The Book of Dreams?*”

Another voice, a kinder voice, then called to Charlie, “*Weren’t you asked not to open the present?*”

Charlie gasped and the flashlight fell out of his mouth. Picking it up, he shone the light across the book. On the cover, the title started to disappear. The book shook violently in Charlie’s hands and the original title was replaced by slimy green letters, which read:

The Book of Skunk Weavel Rules!

A foul smell came from the words, making Charlie gag. Encircled by a long, red rattlesnake, they seemed to glow and writhe like worms. And if there were two things in life that Charlie hated, it was snakes and worms.

The first mesmerizing voice then hissed, “*You’re not frightened of snakies, are you, little boy?*”

“Of course not,” replied a terrified Charlie, adding indignantly, “And I’m not little.”

Charlie quickly turned to the first page. There was a cartoon on the page that showed an ugly mouth with a flaky whiskery moustache. Suddenly, a long tongue shot out from the mouth and licked the lips, startling Charlie. The mouth formed a smile, displaying an awful set of dingy, crooked teeth. From the rank lips, words began to whisper; words that were slowly appearing on the page Charlie was staring at.

**Welcome, my brave friend.
Bring this half of the book to me
and I promise life
will never ever be the same again.**

Charlie turned to the next page. The mouth cackled a horrible laugh and disappeared only to be replaced by a very faint drawing of a feather and the much kinder voice that issued the following warning:

**Charlie, you've broken your word
so you're in the story until you
finish it. Beginning right now!**

Then the voice started to tell the story in the book...

**The little creature kissed his mother
and father a tearful goodbye.
Silently sliding through a hole in
the dusty floor of the toymaker's workshop,
he began a long and tiring journey.**

**Arriving at a farmhouse after many days toil,
he climbed up to a bedroom window and began to tap.**

Tap, tap, tap!

Charlie froze under his covers.

Tap, tap, tap. There it was again. He could hear his heart thumping against his chest.

Tap, tap, tap.

He definitely wasn't dreaming.

And he wasn't imagining either.

Someone or something was definitely tapping at the window.