

THE  
**LUCY WILSON**  
*MYSTERIES*



**VIVA LAS LLANTWIT MAJOR**



**CHRIS LYNCH**

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Lucy Wilson liked to consider herself “a bit of Legend”, even if a major part of her somewhat self-appointed responsibilities was to keep what she got up to outside of school hours a closely guarded secret. As the granddaughter of the late Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, Lucy had inherited a mantle that she described with titles like “Defender of Earth” and “Guardian of Humanity”. Mostly, it involved defending her home in Ogmores-by-Sea and the surrounding area from the increasingly frequent alien incursions that had been occurring almost since the day she arrived. She’d been moved down from “that London” (as people here called it) against her will by her parents under the dubious claim of “following their dream”, and it had been downhill (alien wise) ever since.

Lucy had hated living in Wales at first but, like any true Londoner, she understood the importance of protecting “her manor”, whether that was Ogmores or the entire planet, and she’d lived up to the family reputation for fearlessness and indefatigability in the face of the weird, the alien, and the downright strange. Her new home had grown on her as well, as much as she hated to admit it, mostly through the constant promotion of the area and its many virtues by her best friend, Hobo.

A little older than Lucy, Hobo had “adopted” her

shortly after she'd arrived in Ogmores. He was an outsider, like her, marked out as different by his alopecia just as much as Lucy was by her mixed-heritage, dodgy accent, and inability to keep her mouth shut. They had gravitated to each other, as outsiders often do, and formed a fast friendship. Since then, Hobo had been Lucy's stalwart companion on her many adventures, his physical strength and his incredible intellect both serving them well.

Unfortunately, like a lot of clever kids, Hobo had interests. For the uninitiated in the particular nuances of interests these are a lot like hobbies, but they are pursued with the intensity of a mad doctor trying to bring a jigsaw of human body parts back to life, and with the relentlessness of Saint Matthew, the patron saint of tax collectors. When they weren't fighting off alien invasions, or dealing with normal young human person things like school and homework, Lucy often found herself dragged along by Hobo to take part in one of his interests. Today was no exception.

'How much longer?' whined Lucy.

The beach below her vantage point, sitting on a low stone wall with the wind in her face, was arranged in a series of what looked like stone steps that led to the kind of rock and shale arrangement that was typical of the area. This was not Ogmores

beach though, which would have been within convenient walking distance of Lucy's house, Lucy's wardrobe, and the warmer coat that Lucy's mother had told Lucy she would need today. No, this was Llantwit Beach, an hour of bus and thirty minutes of walking from the aforementioned coat, and the current subject of close scrutiny by Hobo.

He popped up from behind one of the stone shelves, a magnifying glass held awkwardly between his teeth and a set of stone working tools in his hands.

'Ooochee, id id hamhazing! Ow can oo ee oared?'

Lucy rolled her eyes and sighed, a response she had honed to the point where could start a sigh and eye roll with all the speed and precision of a deadly quick-draw gunslinger. If Lucy and Hobo were ever to find themselves transported across space and time for an adventure in the Old West, which was certainly not beyond the realms of possibility, she would probably have picked up the name "The Exasperated Kid". Spending time with Hobo could do that to you.

'Magnifying glass!' she shouted.

'Ot?'

'Mag-ni-fying glass!' she shouted again, pointing at her mouth with both hands.

'Ho,' said Hobo, disappearing from sight and then returning with a magnifying glass-less mouth. 'I had that in there, didn't I?'

'You are the stupidest clever person in the entire world,' said Lucy sarcastically.

'Quite possibly,' replied Hobo. 'Now, what were you asking?'

'How much longer you were going to be down there doing... Hobo stuff?'

'Oh,' replied Hobo. 'I could literally spend a year just on this section. It's incredible, there are fossils here that you would not believe.'

Lucy raised a sardonic eyebrow.

'I was chased by an actual living dinosaur. Last year. In lockdown.'

'I know,' said Hobo, 'But that's not the same. Look at this!'

Hobo disappeared for a second then reappeared, clambering up onto the rock shelf and crab walking across to Lucy holding a small chunk of rock. He held it out in front of her reverently, angling it slightly so that the light caught a series of tiny indentations on its surface.

'See that?' he asked expectantly, looking at the rock.

'It's a trilobite,' said Lucy, distinctly unimpressed. 'Well, most of a trilobite. There's a bit missing.'

Hobo stuffed the fossil into the front pocket of his hoodie. Hobo loved hoodies and had the kind of hoodie collection that would have made even a hoodie obsessed billionaire question whether or not

they needed any more hoodies. He liked them big and baggy. Lucy was inclined to think it was all about storage capacity. Hobo always seemed to have what he needed in the front pouch of his hoodie. It was like Batman's utility belt, if Batman's utility belt was 100% cotton and the colour of baby sick. Utility, not fashion, was Hobo's approach to clothing.

Lucy sniggered as Hobo folded his arms and scrunched up his face in a mock-Lucy-huff.

'We've only been looking for forty minutes!' he grumbled. 'Actually, I've only been looking for forty minutes, you've been sitting on this wall. I brought you your own hammer, you know.'

'Imagine how thrilled I am,' said Lucy. 'I just... don't see the point. You've seen actual dinosaurs, Hobo. Real, live dinosaurs.'

'But this is history, Lucy. Actually, it's pre-history. We are the first people to see this fossil ever. The first people in the entire universe to know that this trilobite was here. It's like... travelling in time!'

'Argh!' screamed Lucy in frustration. 'You have actually travelled in time though! It's happened! We did it!'

Hobo shuffled and sat down on the wall next to Lucy.

'Maybe keep your voice down a bit?' he said gently. 'Lucy, you can't spend all your time waiting for the next adventure. I mean, aliens aren't going to



just keep falling into our laps, are they? We're going to get some downtime. So, let's enjoy it.'

'I know,' said Lucy glumly. 'I just... I find it hard to get excited about stuff that isn't...'

'Lethbridge-Stewart stuff?' suggested Hobo. Lethbridge-Stewart stuff was their shorthand for anything weird, strange, and dangerous that came their way. Somehow, they'd managed to keep it off the radar of most people, with a little help from some Lucy's "extended family". Hobo suspected that it was the lack of any messages from Lucy's contacts in the grown-up world of alien-hunting, Dame Anne Bishop in particular, that was getting her down. The last time that they thought they had heard from Dame Anne the message had turned out to be fake, leading them into a dangerous trap. Since then, contact had been non-existent.

'I just think we maybe need to, you know, keep an eye out a bit more,' said Lucy.

'Keep watching the skies, eh?' said Hobo, nudging her playfully in the ribs as he turned sideways to look at her. 'You know Pennyworth will let us know if anything weird hits the news.'

Pennyworth was Hobo's homebrewed artificial intelligence, a particularly sarcastic personality crammed into a pocket-sized smart speaker. Personally, Lucy would have preferred an Alexa, but she hadn't ever had the heart to tell Hobo as much.

‘If I can also make one other point,’ said Hobo. ‘You’ve also got a homework project about dinosaurs due in tomorrow. You’ve been moaning about it all week. You moaned about it all through Saturday. So, maybe just a little fossil hunting of a Sunday morning and you might find something to inspire you? I very much doubt a school report on how you got chased by a real life dinosaur during lockdown is going to cut it, is it?’

‘Like school matters,’ said Lucy with a shrug.

‘What?’ gasped Hobo, covering his mouth in shock. ‘I cannot believe you just said that.’

‘Oh, stop clutching your pearls, Hobo,’ said Lucy. ‘It’s just... normal school is just somewhere for us to hide out, isn’t it? It’s not like there’s a special college for alien hunters and I need nine GCSEs to get in. My life is mapped out and completing a dinosaur collage is not going to change that.’

‘You don’t know what the future has in store, Lucy,’ said Hobo, genuine concern in his voice. ‘None of us know what’s around the corner.’

‘Except I do, don’t I?’ said Lucy. ‘Even if I hadn’t been bouncing around in time, I know enough to know that my future does not involve the greatest amount of academic excellence being required. It mostly involves them. The aliens. My family. It’s all linked up, Hobo. I’m just waiting. That’s why I’m so bored.’

Hobo scratched his chin in the way he often did when he was thinking. His alopecia made him hairless but somewhere there was a fictional beard that Hobo cared for a great deal and he liked to scratch it when he was thinking.

‘That’s one possible future,’ said Hobo. ‘We know there are others. Just like we know the past isn’t exactly fixed. Time is fluid. And, speaking from a non-relativistic, non-euclidian perspective—’

‘Do not go quantum on me!’ interrupted Lucy.

‘I’m just saying,’ said Hobo, changing tact, ‘That we shouldn’t give up on having the life we choose, normal or not. I haven’t. Our adventures are amazing, Lucy, and I wouldn’t change a single thing but... my future may not lie in that direction. I could still be an engineer, or a scientist, or a doctor or – what?’

Hobo had noticed a grin spreading over Lucy’s face, a very tell-tale grin, the grin she normally only got when things had just turned in her favour. Things had a habit of doing that, he’d noticed.

‘Hmmm,’ mused Lucy in a sweet tone. ‘I suppose you’re right, it’s just...’

‘Just what? What is it, Lucy?’

‘Look out to sea, Hobo,’ said Lucy with a wink.

Hobo turned sideways again, taking his eyes off Lucy to look down the beach and out at the sea. Shimmering somewhere between them and the

horizon was a curtain of energy, something that bent the light as if they were sitting inside a giant glass tube. Down on the beach itself, everyone and everything was frozen; people stood stock still with arms outstretched to catch a frisbee that hung motionless in mid-air, a seagull sat inert halfway through its take off, and the various walkers and fossil hunters and day trippers were all frozen in place as if time had simply been switched off.

Craning her neck, Lucy looked all around, following the contour of the semi-visible barrier as it curved around them on both sides. As best as could work out, it formed a circle around them, the sea, and probably all of the town of Llantwit Major just up the road from the beach. Looking up into the sky, it seemed to go on forever, past the clouds at least and up into the upper atmosphere.

‘Can you move?’ Lucy asked Hobo.

‘Yep,’ said Hobo, giving his legs a test wiggle.

‘Me too,’ said Lucy. She shoved her hand up her jumper and rummaged about until she found her time ring, the mysterious piece of alien jewellery she’d inherited from Dame Anne the first time she’d met her, running away from aliens on the London Underground. Lucy still wasn’t sure exactly what it did, or how it did it, and especially not how to work it, but the ring had a funny habit of keeping her and Hobo safe from all sorts of interdimensional space-

timey strangeness. It was warm to the touch and vibrating slightly, as it always when it powers were called upon.

'Stay close,' said Lucy, gingerly getting up from the wall. 'Whatever this is, the time ring is keeping us safe for now.'

'Does that ring grant wishes?' asked Hobo as he got up.

'No, I don't think so, why?'

'Because if it does I'm blaming this entire thing on you.'

'I don't make the aliens come,' said Lucy. 'But still... they come.'

'Do not turn Jeff Wayne against me,' grumbled Hobo. 'Some things are sacred.'

'Who's Jeff Wayne?'

Hobo didn't answer, mostly because Lucy was already on the move towards the road that ran back up to the town and partly because, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get Lucy to embrace science fiction even on an instructional level.

'Come on,' she called over her shoulder. 'If we get separated you might get frozen as well!'

Hobo didn't answer that either, partly because he knew it would do no good but mostly because he really didn't want to end up frozen. As much as he might hate to admit it, he'd been missing Lethbridge-Stewart stuff too.

\*

It took them a little over twenty minutes to reach the edge of town. Thankfully, the freezing effect also froze cars and their drivers so they'd made fast progress without having to leap up onto grass verges to let cars go past them. They'd spent a lot of time running away from, and occasionally towards, things over the past few years and they were definitely getting better at it.

'Personal best?' said Hobo, with only a slight wheeze, as they jogged through the silent streets of white-walled cottages and old stone buildings towards the middle of town.

'Certainly in our top five,' said Lucy, coming to a halt at an intersection. She looked up at the sky, trying to work out how close they were to the centre of the barrier.

Around them, people stood in frozen tableaux of their day to day lives and nothing, nothing at all, moved. They stopped for a moment by a window cleaner and Hobo peered intently at the droplets of water suspended in mid-air where they had fallen from the window-cleaner's sponge at the moment time had stopped. Cautiously, he pushed a fingertip against one of the bubbles, moving it slowly through the air.

'It's like pushing against a door,' he said, straining more and more the further the bubble got from its

original position. When he finally pulled his finger away, the bubble snapped back to where it had started out with soft “pop” of air filling up the void where it had been.

‘Someone wants things just as they are,’ said Lucy. Hobo looked at her sideways.

‘It’s not me!’ she said defensively. ‘Honestly!’

‘I didn’t say a word,’ said Hobo, straightening up from his bubble-inspecting duties and taking a look around for himself. ‘So, where are we headed?’

Lucy nodded her head in the direction of a road sign. ‘It should be obvious.’

‘Ah,’ said Hobo. ‘Of course.’

‘Who wrote our rules for time travel, Mr Kostinen?’ asked Lucy, teasing.

‘I did.’

‘And who insisted we memorised those rules?’

‘I did.’

‘And what do we do in the event of time travel weirdness?’

‘We find the oldest nearby landmark,’ replied Hobo. ‘As close to a consistent fixed navigational point as we can.’

‘Which is normally?’

‘A church,’ said Hobo. ‘We go to the nearest church.’

‘Very good,’ said Lucy. ‘And it is a Sunday, so...’

Lucy set off at a run, Hobo trailing behind her yet

again. The church was only a few streets away and as they arrived any doubts that they might have had that it was the very centre of the bizarre time freezing effect that surrounded the town were instantly dispelled by the presence of a small alien spacecraft parked outside the church. Lucy and Hobo ducked down behind the nearest parked car and peeped out for a better look.

The size of a small van, the ship seemed to be comprised of overlapping spheres so that it looked like a metallic bunch of grapes perched on spindly, insect-like legs. Cables trailed from underneath the craft across the ground and down the small set of steps onto the church grounds, pulsing with energy that seemed to shoot back out from the castellated tower of the church and up, into the sky.

‘An energy beam into the sky,’ said Hobo. ‘Someone’s been watching the movies.’

‘And they’ve double-parked, the cheeky wotsits. What do you think they’re up to?’ asked Lucy, starting to creep out from behind the car.

Hobo grabbed Lucy by the jumper and pulled her back down out of sight.

‘And...’ he warned. ‘Are they dangerous?’

‘They can’t be smart,’ said Lucy defiantly. ‘Not if they’re trying something like this on my patch.’

‘But we don’t know what they’re doing, do we?’ said Hobo. ‘I’m just urging a little caution.’



Lucy looked at Hobo and smiled as she shook herself loose from his grip. 'I will be cautious,' she said reassuringly. 'I'll cautiously tell them to get out of Llantwit before I cautiously stick my trainer up their alien—'

Lucy stopped mid-sentence, the feeling of cold metal on the back of her neck. In the car's wing mirror, she could see the legs and lower torso of a figure behind her, wearing a silver and white spacesuit and with what was almost certainly an alien weapon of some sort pressed against her neck.

'They're behind me, aren't they?' she squeaked.

'And it's not even panto season,' said Hobo sadly.

Getting captured was part of the job, as Lucy saw it. In fact, getting captured was often the best and most efficient way of getting inside the alien base, ship, or stronghold and finding out what was going on. If there was a special school where people went to train to fight aliens, Lucy made a mental note to check that "How to Get Captured" was on the curriculum.

'Don't worry, Hobo,' she said, her back pressed against the wooden pulpit of the church. 'I've got them right where I want them now.'

'Oh yes, don't worry,' said Hobo sheepishly, 'I can totally see that.'

In front of them, the alien in the silver and white spacesuit was keeping its weapon trained on them.

It had green skin and a hairless, bulbous head with enormous eyes. If Lucy hadn't known better, she'd have said that the creature had stepped straight out of one of the old science fiction movies that Hobo had tried to make her watch. She nodded subtly at the creature and Hobo nodded back, mouthing silently 'I know.'

'You may as well tell me what you're up to,' said Lucy. 'Hurry up now.'

The creature didn't answer. Behind it, others of its kind worked on a strange, alien machine. The cables that Lucy and Hobo had seen outside came straight through the doors of the church and were connected to the machine, an eight or nine feet tall bronze column surrounded by floating screens displaying scenes from all around the town. The screens moved and shifted around as if the thing were configuring or adjusting itself. The aliens made notes on their slim, silver tablets and tapped at the screens with their long green fingers, nodding or shaking their heads from time to time. When they "spoke" it wasn't in English, as most aliens are polite enough to do in human company, instead they made a seemingly random set of squeaking and honking noises that sounded as if someone were trying to fax an entire goose. The air was hazy around them, like looking through a dirty window or a patch of fog. It gave Lucy a headache if she tried to focus on it. Even

the alien nearest to them was difficult to focus on for too long.

'Well?' said Lucy, feigning impatience.

'Oh... my.... Word.'

The voice came from the doors of the church where a new alien had walked in. He looked just like the others, except that his spacesuit was gold where theirs were silver and he had sunglasses on over his giant eyes. They didn't fit.

'Guys!' continued the alien, jogging excitedly down between the pews. His voice sounded like a Southern dandy from an old black and white movie or a chicken-obsessed former Colonel with a world spanning empire of eateries. 'Don't you know who this is?'

The alien squeezed his way past the others and presented itself in front of Lucy and Hobo. It pushed the other alien's gun down towards the floor with an apologetic hand motion. Close up, he wasn't as blurry as the others and Lucy realised that his face wasn't moving when he spoke

'Terry, for goodness sake! This is Lucy Wilson and George Kostinen!'

The alien took off its sunglasses and tucked them into the top pocket of its spacesuit. Lucy realised it looked less like a spacesuit and more like a golden business suit, the lapels stitched into the main body and narrow silver pinstripes running through it. As

Lucy and Hobo watched, the alien reached behind its head and with a sound like ripping Velcro, peeled off its skin to reveal a sweaty human face underneath.

‘Don’t faint, Hobo,’ said Lucy, noticing Hobo heaving slightly next to her. ‘It was just a mask.’

The man who had been an alien a few seconds ago held out his hand, still wearing the warty blue rubber glove that Lucy and Hobo had mistaken for alien skin.

‘I’m Phineas,’ he said, ‘Phineas P. Phineas.’

‘Does the middle P stand for Phineas?’ asked Lucy, refusing the stranger’s hand.

‘Ha, no, Pauline actually. It was my grandmother’s name.’

‘You’re human,’ said Hobo, his brain catching up as he got his stomach under control.

‘Mostly,’ said Phineas with a smile that revealed more teeth than any human, or even close family of humans, have ever had. They were more like needles, tightly packed together in every corner and angle of his mouth like the sucker of a squid. ‘I’m one-eighth Poltroodian. Hence the teeth. You’ve probably never heard of them though, not much for travelling are the Poltroodians.’

‘A human, alien hybrid?’ asked Hobo nervously.

‘Bit rude,’ replied Phineas. ‘If you don’t mind me saying.’

‘Sorry?’ replied Hobo awkwardly.

'Oi!' interrupted Lucy. 'Don't apologise! Phineas P. Phineas here just froze a whole town with his weird alien gizmo. He doesn't exactly have the moral high ground!'

'Terry,' said Phineas, clapping the other alien on the shoulder. 'Be a good lad and go get us some tea would you? What do you say, guys? Tea and a nice chat, get this all sorted out?'

Terry shrugged and slouched off towards the doors of the church, leaving his weapon leaning up against one of the pews. Phineas noticed Hobo eyeballing it.

'It's not real,' he said. 'Just for show. You don't need a gun as long as people think you have a gun, know what I mean?'

'We just got captured by a fake alien with a fake weapon then,' said Hobo. 'Magic.'

'Oh no, I'm a real alien,' said Phineas reassuringly. 'I mean, I may be mostly human but I wasn't born on Earth. I am, however, a huge fan of it. A massive fan in fact. Earth is the family business.'

'The family business?' asked Lucy, wrinkling her nose. She had experience of family businesses and hers was stopping people like Phineas from doing their business on her planet, or any other if possible.

Phineas turned around and jerked his thumb at an embroidered logo on the back of his golden suit. It was a crude representation of Earth with major

landmarks sticking up from the surface; the pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, and... Ogmores? Wrapped around the Earth logo were the words "PHINEAS P. PHINEAS AND SONS PRESENT: THE PLANET EARTH EXPERIENCE".

'The Planet Earth Experience?' asked Lucy. 'What on earth... I mean, what is that?'

'Living on Planet Earth is the Planet Earth Experience,' muttered Hobo. 'Copyright infringement is what that probably is.'

'The Planet Earth Experience,' said Phineas with a flourish, 'Is the galaxy's number one Earth-based attraction. All the Earth attractions you could ever want, but guaranteed 100% safer than visiting the actual Earth.'

'What's not safe about visiting Earth?' spluttered Lucy incredulously.

'Really?' said Hobo. 'Miss. "Defender of Earth"?' 'You can't be serious.'

'I'm just saying, we're not exactly... welcoming. When it comes to aliens.'

'They keep invading!'

Terry the also-probably-not-an-alien reappeared, carrying a silver tea tray loaded up with a silver teapot, milk jug, and old fashioned looking crockery. A three-tiered cake stand was laden with sandwiches, cakes, and scones.

'Ah!' said Phineas. 'An authentic Earth cream tea!'

Terry held out the tray and Lucy watched as it took flight on its own, floating over into the space between her, Hobo, and Phineas.

‘Well, mostly authentic,’ said Phineas, snagging a cucumber sandwich as the tray floated past him. He popped it into his mouth in one bite, the needle teeth chewing so furiously that they ejected a cloud of crumbs and partly masticated cucumber out into the air.

‘Excuse me,’ said Phineas. ‘Poltroodians aren’t known for their table manners either. Probably why they don’t get out much.’

Hobo slapped Lucy’s hand as she reached out to take a sandwich.

‘What have we agreed about alien snacks?’ he asked pointedly.

‘It’s authentic,’ complained Lucy.

‘So was he, a minute ago.’

‘Fine,’ muttered Lucy. ‘Straight down to business. Phineas P. Phineas as a duly designated Protector and Defender of Earth with the backing of—’

‘Oooh, wait wait wait!’ said Phineas. He snatched one of the silver tablets from the nearest alien and held it up at Lucy. A tiny light shone on the back. ‘OK, from the top.’

‘Are you filming me?’ asked Lucy.

‘It’s not every day you get the full Lucy Wilson “Get off my lawn” speech. I mean, I’ve seen

recordings and stuff but, to see it live... I can't not capture the moment. As you were, Lucy. Three, two, one... action!

Lucy crossed her arms over her chest and looked away, like a toddler refusing a spoonful of lovingly mashed up food.

'Lucy?'

'I've seen this before,' said Hobo. 'She won't do it now.'

Phineas lowered the tablet, pouting as much as possible with a mouthful of razor-sharp needle teeth. It made him look like an angry pin cushion.

'Fine,' he said grumpily.

'I'm not doing the whole thing now,' said Lucy churlishly. 'All you're getting is a "stop what you're doing and go home or else".'

'Or else what?' said Phineas slyly.

'You know what else or else what or... oh!'

Lucy stamped her foot in frustration and Hobo suppressed a snigger.

'It doesn't work when you're in on it,' said Lucy, frowning. 'So, we're really down to business now. What are you actually doing here? You've frozen a town of people out there!'

'Well, this is a little bit embarrassing, if I'm honest,' said Phineas. He swiped another sandwich from the floating tray, tossed it up into the air, and let it tumble down into the furious shredder that was his



mouth. A plume of chewed up ham and bread puffed up into the air.

‘But, well,’ he continued. ‘We’re sort of... stealing Llantwit Major.’

‘You’re what?’ blurted Lucy and Hobo in unison.

‘Please do allow me to explain,’ said Phineas. He wafted the floating tea tray out of the way and turned the tablet around to show Lucy and Hobo the screen. A montage of photographs of different places on Earth faded in and out, some of them clearly replicas (unless someone had recently installed a helter-skelter onto the Eiffel Tower and told no one) while others looked very, very real. After the most obvious, prominent monuments had passed by, there was a series of pictures of what looked like ordinary villages and towns, all filled with happy, smiling people.

‘My great, great, great... well, you get the idea... ancestor, he came from Earth. From what you call the Old West.’

‘He was abducted you mean?’ said Hobo.

‘We’re not big fans of the A-word at Earth World,’ scolded Phineas. ‘We prefer the term “passive relocation”. Anyway, my... ancestor... he finds himself in a strange new world with nothing but his wits and stories of his native land with which to ply a trade. And so he does. He tells stories of Earth and people, well I guess you’d call them aliens, but to us

they're just people, they love them. So he builds himself a house and... guess what? People want to come and see it. They want to see how the Earthman lives. So he charges them entry and lets them poke around. And they love that too. So, Earth World is born.'

'And?' said Lucy.

'There's always an "and",' added Hobo. 'Best just spit it out.'

'Well, as you can see from our brochure here we've got a fantastic range of exhibits but... hmmm, Earth pyramids are good and all, I mean no disrespect, but they're no competition for the Diamond Pyramids of Kor-Nor-Vash. The Eiffel Tower is good but, you know... the Elematrians? They've got a tower that goes all the way from their planet to their third moon. Once the novelty of Earth wore off, we realised we needed something new. Something more... authentic.'

'There's that word again,' said Hobo.

'And so you came to Earth to steal a real Earth town, is that it?' said Lucy. 'Seriously?'

Phineas smiled, that same sucker smile of mashing teeth and bright red gums. The teeth had ham and cucumber on them now. It wasn't a great look.

'Not just any town!' he said, touching a hand to his chest as if he was genuinely hurt. 'We're

stealing... well, not Ogmores-by-Sea technically but when we get it back to the resort we're going to make a few changes and—'

'You meant to steal Ogmores?' asked Hobo. 'I mean, you've missed by about—'

'We haven't missed,' scoffed Phineas. 'You'd just have to be crazy to try and steal the town that Lucy Wilson lives in. I mean, look at you now? Very much un-frozen, are you not? The machine probably can't unpick a timeline as complex as yours. So much history! But no, our plan is way better, way simpler. We're just going to steal a town from near Ogmores, dress it up a little, get ourselves in a great Lucy Wilson impersonator—'

'There are Lucy Wilson impersonators?' said Lucy. 'In space?'

'Amazing,' muttered Hobo. 'Literally the best thing ever. Do they all wear the hat?'

Lucy yanked her knitted beanie off her head self-consciously and shoved it into her pocket. Hobo had been teasing her a lot about the hat lately, as if it was somehow worse than his trademark hoodie. Which it was not.

'You're a bit of a legend,' continued Phineas. 'And, got to admit, I'm a little star-struck here myself.'

'I don't care how star struck you are!' said Lucy, 'You can't steal a town.'

'Well now, we can,' replied Phineas. 'I mean, "this

ain't our first rodeo".'

'You've done this before?' said Lucy incredulously.

'Eight times,' said Phineas. 'It's really got quite popular and we're struggling to deal with the queues. We need to expand.'

The machine made a loud noise like a bell cracking and the floating screens all locked into place. A loud hum came from the base of the device and the pulsating energy that it drew from the spaceship outside seemed to increase in frequency.

'Ah, there we go!' said Phineas, applauding. 'Well done, team! Well done!'

The silver suited aliens bowed, or gave thumbs up, or did both which was strange and awkward to watch. They began scuttling back off towards the doors of the church, their work here clearly complete.

'Are you all just people in masks?' asked Hobo. 'I mean, are you all descendants of the original?'

'Oh no,' replied Phineas. 'We're very much an equal opportunities employer. You should see Terry under his mask... quite the shocker, if I'm honest.'

'So, why the masks then?' continued Hobo. 'What's the point?'

'You can't commit a robbery without a mask, child,' said Phineas. 'Some things just aren't done. Also, you're not the only one with your eye on this planet, so to speak, so if anyone asks what happened

here the blame is going squarely on a group of blue guys in silver suits. Good luck tracking those guys down!’

‘How do you even steal a town?’ asked Lucy. There were at least five different ways that she could think of, all of which came directly from a file in her brain labelled “NOT GOOD THINGS”. She suspected that Hobo could have come up with even more.

‘It’s the machine,’ said Phineas, jerking his thumb at the device in the middle of the church. ‘It’s really rather clever. It creates a... well, let’s call it a force field—’

‘Let’s not,’ said Hobo, who had a particular aversion to be talked down to by aliens, even one-eighth aliens, who assumed he had no working knowledge of quantum mechanics, string theory, or general cosmology and current space-time theory.

‘Let’s call it a force field,’ continued Phineas tersely. ‘And it freezes everything in the field. Then, it works its way back through the established timelines of every person in the bubble and finds an appropriate point in their timeline to just... disconnect them.’’

Phineas waved his hands through the air like a magician who used “disconnect them” as his magical catchphrase.

‘And then?’ asked Lucy, her voice icy.

‘We take them,’ said Phineas matter-of-factly. ‘We take them, we take the town, we take a little bit of countryside around it, just for atmosphere really, and then we sort of just... pave over the hole. Nobody remembers anyone who lived there or anything about it, so it just gets forgotten. No harm done!’

‘No harm done!’ said Lucy angrily. “What about the people you abduct?’

‘The people who are passively relocated,’ growled Phineas. ‘Become the stars of our attraction. They are treated very, very well as it happens. Ample food, always good weather thanks to our simulated Earth-like weather domes, and a full chronological rewind every night so that they start fresh the next day.’

‘A chrono-what-now?’ asked Lucy, who had a tolerance for techno-babble so slim you would have needed a machine that could only be described with an incredible amount of techno-babble to measure it.

‘They forget,’ said Hobo. ‘They rewind them like a rented video, back to the same moment they got taken. Am I right?’

‘Happens you are, good sir,’ said Phineas proudly. We offer them a life of peace, tranquillity, and no consequences. It’s a completely benign and harmless system. I mean, if a person doesn’t know they’ve even been... abducted, can you truly say that

they've been abducted?'

'Yes!' said Lucy and Hobo in disbelieving unison.

Suddenly the machine let out a tortured whine and one of the panels started to move again, clanking and scraping against the others. Phineas turned and a look of concern flashed across his face. Lucy, who had a sixth sense for danger and a seventh sense for when an alien adversary had just exposed a weakness, couldn't help but smile.

'Problem with your machine there, Mr P?' she asked sweetly.

'It's the dang stones,' grumbled Phineas, tapping angrily at his tablet. 'Give me a nice wooden house any day of the week. Trees don't pay a bit of attention to anything but stones... stones remember. Especially when you stack 'em all up like this. This place is chewing up power like you wouldn't believe. You know this church has been here since 395?'

'I did actually,' said Hobo. 'It's actually—'

'Not now, Hobo,' interrupted Lucy. 'Fate of a rather nice little Welsh town at stake.'

'Right,' said Hobo. 'Rhetorical question, so fun facts later. Got it.'

With a loud bang, the screen slammed back into place. The device shuddered, the cables underneath thrashing around like angry snakes for a few seconds before it settled back down.

'Phew,' said Phineas. 'That was close.'

Generally speaking, Lucy wasn't one for violence. A considerable number of aliens had tried to do violence to her, that came with the territory, but ordinarily she was a firm adherent to the "outwit them and turn their own plan against them" school of alien-busting. Her grandfather had been no stranger to all the "old shooting stuff" as he'd called it, but always in his stories it was quick wits and cunning that won the day in the end. Most aliens seemed to be bulletproof anyway. Despite this, there were times when there was nothing that Lucy could think of that was a better option than balling up her fist, pulling her arm way back, and letting fly the best punch she could muster. This was one of those times.

Thankfully, as it turned out, Phineas was not bulletproof. Or even punch-proof.

Lucy's punch caught him square on the nose and he fell backwards onto his bottom, legs flying up in the air.

'Lucy!' admonished Hobo.

'Sorry, but that was necessary,' said Lucy calmly, nursing her hand just a little. She stood over Phineas, her temper flaring in her eyes. 'I don't like you, Phineas P. Phineas,' she said. 'You're sneaky. You've been pinching towns and villages and turning people into slaves. That's what you do and that's what they are. And maybe you think that's OK where you come from, that things are different out there in space. But



they're not. What you're doing is wrong and you're going to stop. You're going to stop or I am going to find myself a spaceship. I'm going to book a ticket to Earth World, and I'm going to bring the entire place down on your stupid head!

Phineas let his head rest back on the cold, stone floor of the church.

'I don't suppose anyone was recording that, were they?' he whimpered. 'Because that was epic. Classic Lucy Wilson.'

'Hobo, shut the machine down.'

Hobo looked from Lucy to the machine and back again.

'How, exactly?'

'Oh, don't show off,' grumbled Lucy. 'Just go and Hobo the thing up. I'm going to have a bit more of a word with Mr P here.'

On cue, Phineas suddenly made a gurgling noise like a blocked drain. His body started to quiver and convulse, his limbs thrashing uncontrollably. A foamy substance bubbled from his mouth.

'Lucy?' gasped Hobo. 'How hard did you punch him?'

'Oh my,' choked Phineas. 'You've done it now.'

'You don't scare me,' said Lucy defiantly.

'You scare me,' Hobo muttered at Lucy.

'I did warn you,' gurgled Phineas, 'I'm one-eighth Poltroodian.'

Before Lucy and Hobo could react, Phineas' mouth opened wide and a muscular, sinuous purple serpent burst out. With Phineas' sharp-toothed sucker mouth at one end, it rose up to twice Hobo's height before it bent forward. Eyeless, it snapped and sucked at the air, probing the space around it. At its base, it vanished back inside Phineas who lay motionless and pale on the church floor, twitching and gasping for air.

'Err, Lucy... do we have a plan for giant space worms?'

'I'm just trying not to think about how all that fits in there,' said Lucy. 'But I'd probably say we... run?'

Spinning on their heels, Lucy and Hobo raced for the door, their feet slapping against the stone flags. Ahead of them, the silver-clad aliens returned to block their path, racing to form a not-human barricade across the door.

'Oh, come on, Terry,' said Lucy. 'I thought you were going to be cool.'

'Argh!' Hobo yelped as the Poltordian worm's mouth latched onto the back of his hoodie and hoisted him up into the air. Ten feet off the ground, he flailed his arms and legs, desperately reaching out for anything he could grab hold of.

'Hobo!' shouted Lucy, skidding to a stop and turning around. The worm swung Hobo left and right through the air like a dog with a new squeaky

chew toy. Thinking fast, Lucy hopped up on the nearest pew, ran a few steps to gain momentum, then jumped up onto the back of the pew like a balance beam before launching herself up into the air after Hobo. She managed to get her hands around one of his ankles and found herself being lifted up further into the air as she swung and tugged and held on tight to the fabric of Hobo's jeans.

'Lucy!' yelled Hobo. Looking up, Lucy could see Hobo was starting to slide out of his hoodie, his arms above his head. 'What was your plan here?'

Before Lucy could answer, her grip slipped and she found herself falling through the air with Hobo's trainer in her hand. She hit the ground hard and felt the wind go out of her as Hobo finally slid out of his hoodie and came tumbling down towards her. Hobo landed half on, half off one of the pews with a loud crack, then fell limply next to Lucy.

'Ow,' said Hobo.

The worm rose up again, munching and shredding its way through Hobo's hoodie, spitting out shreds of fabric into the air.

'Can you move?' wheezed Lucy.

'I landed on my ankle,' winced Hobo. He moved his right leg gingerly, pain etched on his face. 'I think I'm stuck here for the moment.'

'OK,' said Lucy, struggling upright, supporting herself on the nearest pew. 'Any fresh suggestions?'

‘That hoodie was a birthday present,’ said Hobo indignantly. ‘I want you to kick that worm’s butt.’

‘I don’t think it has a butt, Hobo.’

‘Everything has a butt, Lucy.’

Before Lucy could consider whether butt-or-no-butt should be a module of the xenobiology course of her imaginary alien-busting school, the worm had finished its one hundred percent cotton meal. It coughed, spitting Hobo’s fossil out. The stone, slick with saliva and mucus from the worm’s gullet, landed at Hobo’s feet. Hobo reached out and scooped it up, holding it to his chest as if it were a precious gem.

The worm coughed, spat out another clod of fabric, and then focused itself on Lucy. The suckermouth lowered slowly towards her, pulsing open and shut with thin lines of clear drool hanging out of it. Lucy swallowed and mustered all the courage that she had, keeping her eyes fixed on the worm as it sucked and sniffed the air around her, its thick purple body undulating behind it.

‘I know you,’ said the worm. Its voice was wet and guttural, with traces of Phineas’ corn-poke Southern drawl underneath. ‘I know you... Lucy Wilson.’

‘And what’s your name?’ said Lucy, keeping her voice as level and calm as she could. She could hear Hobo behind her, still trying to stand, and movement

at the door behind him. The machine's hum had become higher as well, a whine that faded in and out like the sound of a trapped insect under a glass.

'Poltroodians have no names,' said the worm. 'We are all one, cut from the great worm.'

'Never heard of you,' said Lucy. If getting captured was the best way to find your way into your enemy's stronghold, irritating them was Lucy's number one tactic for getting them talking. She could be very irritating, according to Hobo at least.

'We don't get out much,' said the creature, making a noise that might have been a laugh or might have been the sound of some of Hobo's clothing stuck somewhere down its long, pulsing gullet.

'My friend wants me to kick you off this planet,' said Lucy, holding her nerve. 'I think he's got a point.'

'But I can give you what you want,' said the worm. 'What you really want.'

'And what's that?' asked Lucy. She knew instantly she'd made an error. Another rule to be taught in her school for alien busters – never let them get in your head.

The worm arched backwards and dipped its head toward the machine. The spinning screens slowed down, the images on them running backwards and forwards until they froze and all showed the same image of Lucy and Hobo sitting on the beach. In

unison, the screens spoke, filling the church with Lucy and Hobo's voices.

'I know enough to know that my future does not involve the greatest amount of academic excellence being required. It mostly involves them. The aliens.'

The worm turned toward Lucy, its sucker mouth contorted into a hideous smile.

'You could do this forever,' it said. 'You and your friend, righting wrongs, defending your sleepy little town on the edge of nowhere. I could bring you fresh adversaries every single day, new monsters and new aliens, the most dangerous in the galaxy, and guarantee you'd win every time. You'd never age, never grow up, never have to lose and never have to say goodbye. The greatest show on Earth. Any Earth.'

The worm had crept closer to Lucy as it spoke, lowering itself down to her level so that its wet body slithered along the floor, coiling itself around Lucy's feet. It was close enough that she could smell it, the smell of acidic bile and rotting vegetables.

'That's what we offer,' continued the worm. 'That's what we are. Endless life. The endless worm.'

'Lucy...' said Hobo. He managed to get himself up on a pew and was nursing his ankle. 'You're not really considering this are you?'

Lucy looked at her friend. She was a good liar, she had to be to keep all of her secrets. She didn't like it, but she was good at it, and there was barely

a person in her life she hadn't lied to. She lied to protect them, she lied to keep them safe, she lied because if people knew what really went on when they'd turned out their lights and tucked themselves up in bed then their heads would probably explode. But she didn't lie to Hobo and so she hoped that he didn't see the tiny, fleeting moment of temptation she felt as she looked at him.

After all, who wouldn't want to have these adventures forever?

'Nah,' said Lucy, stepping out from inside the worm's coils. 'I'm not an attraction, I'm not a pet, and I'm certainly not a slave. You can take your offer and shove it, slimy.'

'Then I'll leave you behind,' said the worm, recoiling back towards its machine. 'Phineas was a coward to fear you. You are nothing but a child, scared to grow up, hiding on this planet when you could be amongst the stars. You can't save this town. It is mine.'

The worm's machine sprang back into life. The screens whirled, the images flashing and scrolling once again. Lucy saw the town, the beach, the sea. Then, the images seemed to stretch beyond, and she saw moments that came from the town's past; the past years and decades that Lucy could recognise from their changing fashions, then soldiers, medieval warriors, Romans and monks. Life whizzed past,

time rewinding itself towards some point in the past where the town could be cut loose from the world and stolen by the worm.

Lucy sighed, pulled her woollen beanie out of her pocket and pulled it onto her head. Behind her, Hobo smiled. The beanie was on. The Beanie of Doom. It was go-time.

'I'm not hiding,' she said, raising her voice over the noise of the machine. 'You said it yourself. Everyone knows me. I'm Lucy Wilson. Defender of Earth. I'm a bit of a legend.'

The worm raised its head from the machine.

'Kill them both,' it spat.

At the back of the church, the silver aliens began to move, walking slowly towards Lucy and Hobo. They might not have guns, but there were seven of them to two of Lucy and Hobo, one and half if you gave Hobo a penalty for his dodgy ankle.

'I hope you have a plan, Lucy,' said Hobo. He got painfully to his feet, and Lucy tossed him Terry's not-a-raygun-raygun from where it was resting against the pews. Hobo caught it awkwardly and what it lacked as a weapon it made up for as a crutch, tucked under Hobo's armpit.

'Phineas said my timeline couldn't be unpicked,' said Lucy, fishing the time ring on its chain out from inside her jumper.

'No matter,' replied the worm. 'Phineas always



thinks too small; we can simply expand the capacity of the device to—'

'The capacity that was already struggling with this church?' asked Lucy. 'This church that's only from... what was it?'

'395,' answered Hobo.

'Yeah, that's right,' said Lucy. 'Well, my timeline might not be quite that long, but I've got about a bit. Made a few little trips back and forth in time, nothing fancy. I did meet a dinosaur once...'

The worm paused for a moment. Lucy smiled. There it was. The chink in the armour. The exposed heel of Achilles. Professor Plum picking up the candlestick in the library with a murderous glint in his eye. Bingo, Yahtzee, checkmate, and one-nil to Lucy Wilson of Earth.

'You are nothing. A... trifle,' growled the worm. 'The machine—'

'Has to have a limit,' replied Lucy. 'Nothing is forever.'

In one swift motion, Lucy snapped the chain holding the time ring from around her neck. A ripple burst out from it, time and space bending like the surface of a lake hit by a stone. Everything, for a moment, slowed down to a crawl. The aliens, realising that something was wrong, lunging forward were frozen. The worm's mouth, razor-edged, wide open in a howl of protest. Hobo, his

hand moving painfully slowly from his pocket, something clutched in his hand.

‘Hoooooooooooooooo,’ said Lucy, her voice stretched out in a slow-motion sound effect. ‘Caaaaaaaaaaaaatch!’

Lucy’s arm moved through the air as if she were pushing it through a pile of invisible cushions, the time ring leaving her hand flying, floating, maddeningly slowly through the air. Hobo’s hand opened, revealing a small stone fossil that began its own flight, arcing slowly through the air, past the time ring and towards Lucy.

‘ Y o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o u tooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!’ gasped Hobo.

After that, everything happened very, very quickly.

The screens of the machine froze just a second, or maybe for a second short of forever, neither Lucy nor Hobo could really be sure afterwards. When the screens did start to move again it was with pictures of the town racing back through the years, through the centuries, and through the millennia, rewinding itself back through time. Building by building, brick by brick, stone by stone, the town deconstructed itself around them, unpicked and unravelled as if some invisible force was tugging on the thread that held the world together. Hobo watched, clutching Lucy’s time ring tightly in his hand, as the church

broke apart around him, a tornado of glass and stone that whirled in time with the screens of the worm's device, faster and faster, until both had become a nothing but a blur. The silver-clad aliens were swept up in the maelstrom of flying masonry, streaks of screaming silver and blue that streamed past over and over again

The worm itself, growling with rage and frustration, tried to slither back inside Phineas' body, wriggling and writhing its way back down into his gullet. Whatever force had pulled apart the church was tugging at Phineas as well, dragging him slowly across the floor. The worm noticed too, but too late. It tried to latch on the ground with its razor tooth sucker but couldn't find a grip and before it tried anything else, the maelstrom had consumed Phineas and the worm as well.

Hobo stood for a moment in the middle of it all, alone in the chaos, just him and the machine. He watched the screens, watched the last of the buildings in Llantwit Major disappear, the ground turning green again. Trees dwindled to saplings before disappearing back below ground. The grass rose and fell, animals passing by in flashes. Seasons, each one shorter than the last, passed by. There was ice, just for a moment, before darkness fell and the sky turned black. When it cleared, the vegetation had changed, becoming larger and stranger. Finally, the

unmistakable shapes of dinosaurs appeared, holding their place on the screens far longer than the timid, fleeting mammals had. Hobo couldn't help but smile when he saw them.

'There you are,' he said. 'Just like I imagined.'

And just as Hobo was wondering what would come next, time started running in the opposite direction. The dinosaurs retreated, vanishing into darkness, the world iced over and thawed again, then turned green before the cycle of the seasons renewed itself. Llantwit Major rose like a phoenix of wood and stone and brick and concrete, reincarnated and restored just as it had been.

The church was last, the old stones with their long memories finding their familiar places. Of the silver-clad aliens and Phineas P. Phineas there was no sign, as if they had simply ceased to be. Unpicked from time perhaps, as they had planned to do to the people of the town, or swallowed up somewhere on this journey forwards and back through history. Hobo wondered if, perhaps, their fossils were now somewhere beneath his feet, waiting to be found.

Finally, the machine came to a rest and with a final whine like someone rubbing a particularly angry cat along the strings of a harp, faded out of existence. The cables on the floor vanished too and Hobo guessed that outside, the double-parked spaceship had similarly disappeared.

'Did it work?' asked Lucy, unfrozen at last.

'We appear to have been successfully de-wormed,' replied Hobo, a wide grin on his face. He tossed Lucy's time ring back to her, the tiny silver circle shining as brightly as it ever had. 'Thanks for the lend.'

'You're welcome,' said Lucy, throwing Hobo back his fossil as she caught the ring. She fixed it back on the chain back around her neck and shoved it under her jumper, patting it for good luck.

'The old time ring strikes again,' she said.

'Lucy Wilson strikes again,' corrected Hobo.

'Lucy and Hobo strike again,' countered Lucy, linking her arm into Hobo's and leading him out of the church. He was still limping but, thankfully, his ankle already seemed to be feeling better. Outside, the sun was shining and everyone seemed to be going about their day as if nothing had strange had happened. For them, that was probably entirely true.

'The universe has a way of cleaning up after us, doesn't it?' said Hobo. 'Have you ever noticed that?'

'Don't knock it,' said Lucy. 'Unless you want to start carrying around a shovel for alien disposal duty.'

'Gross, Lucy.'

They walked along in silence for a while. Not a single soul that they passed seemed to know what had happened, how close they had come to being the latest exhibits in an interstellar zoo, or how two

passing schoolkids had been the last and only line of defence the earth had to offer. Eventually, Lucy and Hobo found themselves at the train station, their return journey to Ogmores-by-Sea beckoning.

'Lucy,' said Hobo, awkwardly breaking the silence. 'What that... thing said. Back there. It wasn't in your head or anything, you know that right? It was just trying to...'

'Convince me to let it steal a whole town? Yeah, I know.'

'It's just, you know, whatever happens... I'm always going to be there for you, right?'

Lucy rolled her eyes. 'Don't go soft on me, Kostinen. You're supposed to be the logical one. You're my Dr Spock.'

'It's Mr,' said Hobo, looking mildly irritated.

'I know what it is,' said Lucy. 'But you don't need to worry. You were right. The future isn't mapped out. My legacy, whatever you want to call it? It's a blessing and I'd never change it but... it doesn't define me. I'm not going to be Defender of Earth forever.'

'Really?' said Hobo disbelievingly.

'No,' replied Lucy. 'I've got much, much bigger plans. We just found out that aliens have been taking humans from Earth for years and somewhere, out there, they're being kept in a zoo. Does that sound like the kind of thing I'd let slide?'

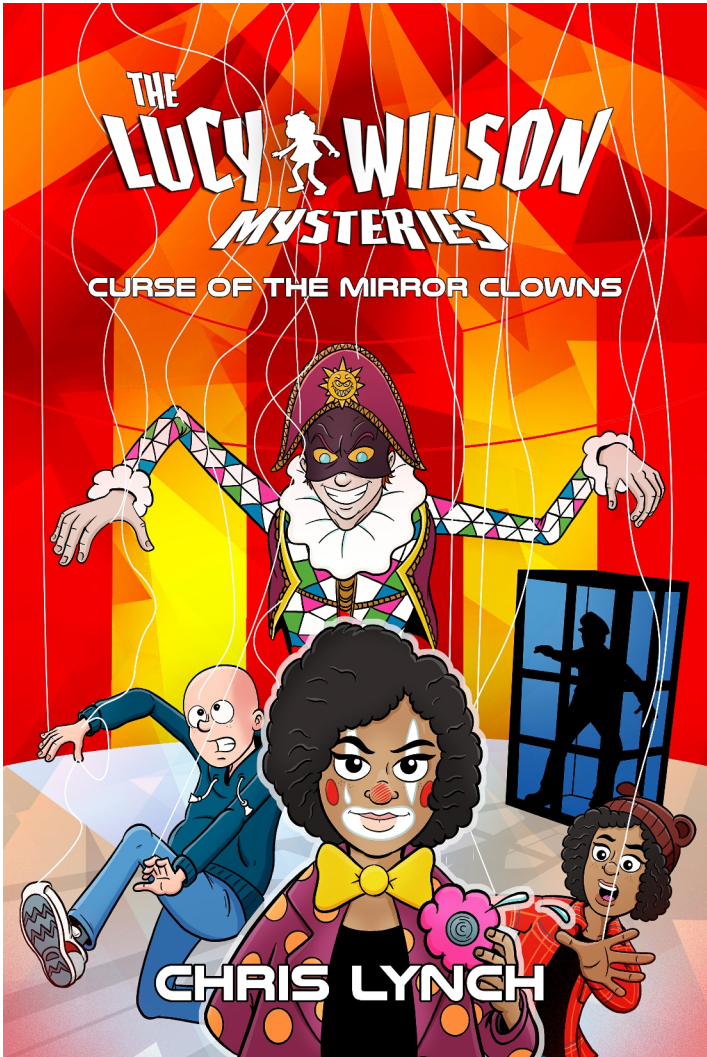
'I kind of thought you might send an email to Dame Anne or something?' said Hobo awkwardly. Saying it out loud, an email did sound like a silly idea. Lucy would at least make a call.

'Today, yes,' said Lucy. 'But I promise you, Hobo, one day I'm going to get my hands on a spaceship, or a time ship, or whatever and I'm going up there. I'm going to get up there and I'm going to right some wrongs. Aliens beware!'

Hobo smiled. 'You know, if you did get your hands on a time machine then chances are you're already out there,' he said. 'Right now.'

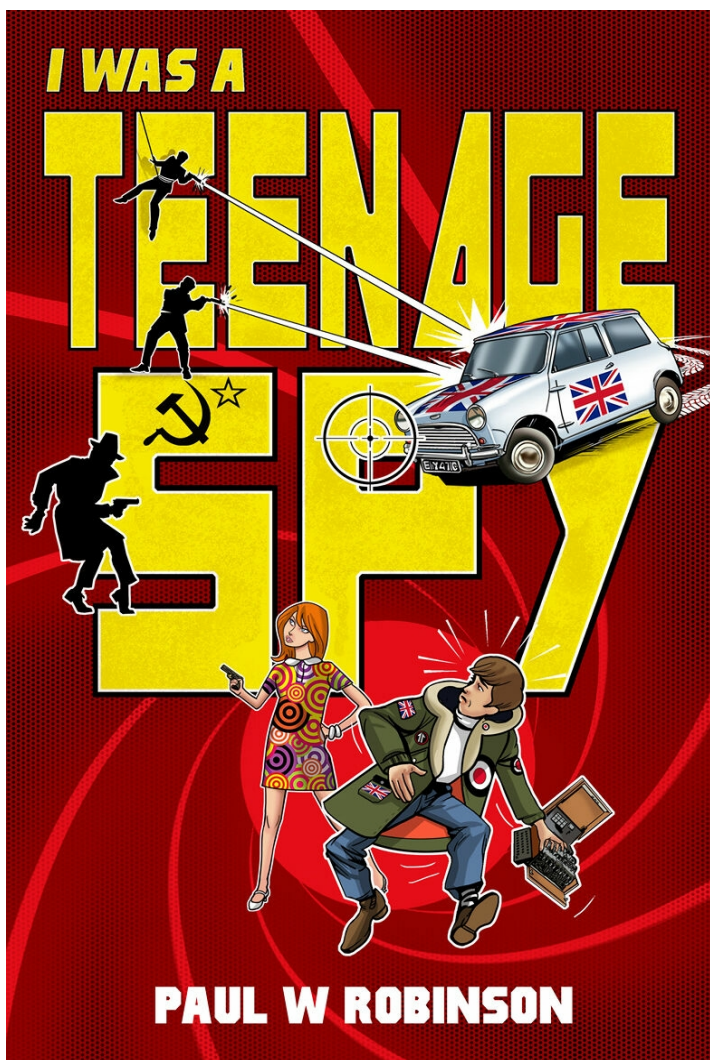
'That would not surprise me at all,' said Lucy with a smile. 'I am a bit of a legend.'

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# THE PHOENIX AND THE CARPET



**E. Nesbit**

FOREWORD BY GARY RUSSELL  
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